

BLOODLESS GOD

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Brennan Chadwick Emerson

Part One

- 1 -

"The People's Universal Front?" I chuckled. "Really Wilson, they're harmless. Is that why you called?"

"Yes." He sat uncomfortably in the armchair beside me. We had not spoken in more than five years, since we were in the army together. Even then I did not know him well—a few drunken escapades and such, but that was a long time ago. He was older now (aren't we all); his sandy blonde hair retreating; his gut beginning to show. He was thirty if I remember right. A year older than me. "Your name came up."

"Officially?"

"No, nothing like that. I just saw your name."

"And thought you'd say hi to your old friend?"

"Well..." He couldn't lie. He had always been honest. I was on the verge of laughter; something about the situation just struck me as funny. He avoided my eyes. "I just thought."

"No worries Wilson." I slapped him on the knee. "You're just doing your job. Want something to drink? Juice? Soda? Beer?"

"Some water, thanks." I walked to the kitchen and filled a glass. Through the window I watched a cruise ship leaving town, to Alaska no doubt. We were in my Belltown condo; all glorious 875 square feet of it. I had been there a little more than a year. Before that I lived in Ballard, where my roommate, Karl, was part of the People's Universal Front, or P-U-F, or "puff" as I called them. I grabbed a Coke and returned to the living room.

"You ever talk to Harrison?" I asked as I sat down.

"No." Tom answered, taking a sip of water. "Well, we exchanged a few e-mails, but that was back in... 2003, I believe."

"Nothing since?" He shook his head. "Anyone else?"

"I kept in contact with Hayes for a few years but not anymore. Of course when I was still in I ran into people here and there. You?"

"Me? No. Once you're out, you know. I made it to Jackson's funeral though. A few guys were there. But that was 2005. Jeez. I forget sometimes how long it's been. Did you go?" I motioned with my head as if to a far off place.

"Iraq?" His eyes darkened. "No. Missed by a few months. I got out December '04. My unit deployed February '05. A lot of guys... You?"

"No, no... something different for me."

"I heard something about that."

"Really?"

"From multiple people." A question hung in his eyes, but he did not ask. As if into a cabinet, he filed it away. "About the People's Universal Front." A notebook appeared in his hand. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. Write away. Oh, can I see your badge?" For some reason this unsettled him. It was momentary, true, but I think he blushed before reaching into his suit jacket and handing me his FBI badge and credentials. I knew how much they meant to him; how it had been his goal from the start; a childhood dream come true, unlike those of so many others. But it made me wonder, in the years to come, would he ever desire to have dreamed of something else? Just a thought; one of those things you think when you look at some people. "Well Agent Wilson," I said, glancing over the credentials, "what would you like to know?"

"Everything you know about the PUF."

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The People's Universal Front was an underground socialist organization whose stated purpose consisted of three goals: (1) the conversion of the United States into a socialist state; (2) the redistribution of wealth; and (3) the abolition of all practices deemed counter-productive to the social well being. Lofty goals, I admit, especially considering the PUF consisted of exactly four members—Karl Hobenoff, Alexander Spinoza, Roderick Anders and Clara Kirpatrick. Karl and I were roommates for nearly two years in a small single story house on ---- Street in Ballard. It was a rotten little place, but it had a view of the locks and from the porch you could see a bit of downtown.

I knew Karl nominally as a teenager. When I moved back to Seattle our mutual friend, Reagan, arranged things between us. A sweet girl Reagan. She later slept on our couch for a month and a half after she broke up with her boyfriend. She spoiled us. She is a chef at

---, that exquisite restaurant on Queen Anne. Three or four times a week she would cook a full meal for us. And the desserts. She would cook all night, supplying the house, no matter how many people were in it, with an assortment of tortes, truffles, pies, cakes and chocolate sweets I cannot describe. Whatever stresses she was attempting to suppress by drowning herself in her craft, we were the beneficiaries.

She wore herself thin though, and often I would find her passed out on the couch still dressed in her work clothes. The last time, I examined her face. It was tense, harried. It's amazing how slowly you notice someone else's problems when you benefit from them.

I fell asleep leaning against the couch, thinking many things I would never say. In the night I slid to the ground. When she swung her feet off the couch in the morning, she stepped on my head. Startled, she jumped back on the couch with a short scream. As I sat up rubbing my skull she began to laugh.

"Are you okay?" She managed through a smile.

"Yes." I smiled too, feeling foolish.

"What on earth were you doing on the ground?" She couldn't stop laughing now. We were both wide awake and in a curiously merry mood.

"Well," I really had no answer, "it's a long story."

"I'm sure it is." It seemed like years since I'd seen her smile like that. In the low morning light she seemed otherworldly, phantom-like. Her wrinkled chef's smock was a golden reflection of the living room curtains. Her red hair fell against it in a tangle. "Tell me more over breakfast. I've got to be at work in an hour." Her eyes dimmed.

"Deal, but only if you let me make breakfast." She gave me a curious look.

"Okay." She said haltingly.

In the kitchen I made her sit at the table and poured her a glass of orange juice. Then, ceremoniously, I placed a bowl in front of her and poured it full of Fruit Loops. "Say when." I said as I poured the milk. Chuckling now and then, she waited before waving her hand as a signal to stop. I sat across from her and poured myself a glass of juice. She looked at me, at the bowl of cereal, then back at me. Finally she shrugged her shoulders and began to eat. We were silent.

"Do you remember," she said after awhile, "growing up, my mom never let us eat cereal like this?"

“Vaguely.”

“When I finally moved out on my own, the first time I went shopping I bought Lucky Charms. When I got home I couldn’t wait, I had them for dinner.” She chuckled. “I think I ate half the box.” Finished, she pushed the bowl away and drained the last of the juice. “I’ve got to get into the shower.” She flashed a half smile, stood and walked toward the living room. At the door she turned. “Thanks for breakfast.” She said seriously. I bowed my head in acknowledgement, and she left. When she came home that night she did not cook a thing.

Sitting there, at the breakfast table, I pondered over the power of a bowl of Fruit Loops to potentially change a life. Then, shifting my feet, my toe rustled a piece of paper. Almost automatically, I reached down and retrieved a five by eight sheet of yellow printed paper. It read:

Unite Brothers and Sisters of the United States! Cast off the bourgeoisie-capitalist state! Social equality for all – Unite against the establishment – Boycott banks! They are instruments of oppression. Boycott the war profiteers and oil barons! Stand up for social unity beneath the banner of the Socialist State. Unite Brothers and Sisters! Unite!

—The People’s Universal Front

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Karl Hobenoff was the son of a Boeing machinist and a bank teller, if one is to regard such titles as relevant to the understanding of a man. They were both Republicans and divorced when Karl was three. His father lived in Everett, where he worked the night shift at Boeing’s sprawling plant. After the divorce, his mother rented a house in Shoreline, then Northgate, and eventually near Green Lake, where she lives to this day. Until he was twelve Karl lived with his father three weeks each summer and every other weekend during the remainder of the year. When his father remarried the visits grew less frequent. When I met him he had not spoken to his father for over two years.

“It is the failings of our fathers,” I have heard him say, likely when drunk, “that give us hope. They also fuck us up.”

I never met his father, but it is said the two are very much alike; the same Nordic skin and faint red hair, Scottish cheek and slouching shoulders of diffidence; the same slow walk of undisturbed motion, not agile per se, but peaceful; almost a lumbering gait akin to depictions of a sasquatch. They also shared a passionate disposition. I have heard Mr. Hobenoff is a staunch defender of the Republican faith and that on more than one occasion he found it fit to convert the heathen Democrats through the might of his fists. I would guess alcohol was involved. And likely a fair amount of ignorance.

It was this passion which gave Karl his place in the PUF. The ideas were not his. I know this. When I moved in with him he was ambivalent towards the world. He was the manager of a Jiffy Lube, where he had worked since he graduated high school. God knows how many quarts of oil he had drained and pumped in his life; how many hours he spent in that small building with the dry stench of fumes and grease. I have often wondered why people never revolt, join together with the millions of others; essentially do what the PUF hoped to achieve. Is it that hard to convince people the world might be different—that human life can be anything—culture what we make of it—society as we agree? I wonder, then I consider how Karl would come home each night and play video games or smoke weed with his friends and laugh or curse at a Sonics game or reality show. He had no time to think. He had no time to wonder how it ever came to be that society is not based on very different principles; to ask what it is to be human. No, such things are left to people who find time to think and gradually drive themselves mad with the incongruity of everything. People like Karl Marx. Thomas Jefferson. That guy in Berkeley who told me he had it all figured out; that all we had to do was get everyone naked and the world would be okay. (I was drunk. He was a bum. I promised him five bucks but never gave it to him.) Karl would tell you Roderick Anders was such an individual.

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A short time after he met Roderick, Karl began to preach the good word of socialism.

"I am oppressed." He told me one evening while I sat eating dinner, reading the quiet words of Peter Chelčický¹, sipping a glass of wine and truly enjoying myself. He sat down across from me and burned with the desire to share his newfound social consciousness. He had just walked in from work. A new oil stain glistened on his chest, beneath the company moniker. He sighed loudly and waited until I glanced up from the book. "The workers of the world are oppressed. We must unite!" He looked past me now, into a blank rage of wordless, half understood, injustice. "Damn it man, the world needs to change."

"Are you okay?" I asked. I had never seen him so agitated.

"No, I'm not!" He snapped. "My eyes are open now. Can't you see? My eyes are open!"

"What are you talking about Karl?"

"The oppression of the working man. Don't you understand anything? It's gone on too long. We must unite."

"Who?"

"The workers."

"All of them?"

"Yes!"

"Against whom?"

His eyes grew dull for a moment. He did not know. "The oppressors!" He managed angrily.

"Who are?"

"The capitalists. Oh, you don't understand it. You're not one of us. You're too damn cynical about everything." We were silent a few moments. "Can't you understand, it's not right."

"What?"

"The oppression of the worker." For a moment I thought he would express deeper reasoning. He did not. "Jesus man, people are being used. Exploited!" He slammed his fist on the table, as if by doing so his point would become more true. I could not help it; I smirked in bemusement. "Fuck you!" He screamed and stormed out of the room.

¹ 15th century Bohemian religious thinker and proponent of complete pacifism. His eminent work, which needs to be fully translated into English, is called *Net of Faith*. To the Catholic Church he was a heretic.

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There was a spider crawling in the dust. It was black, small. It got stuck in the blood and drowned. I watched it die without emotion. It was quiet in the cave, and I was alone with the corpse. It was not the first time. He lay awkwardly against the wall where Miller shot him. His turban covered his face. Down the corridor I could hear them coming back. It sounded like they had prisoners. It was useless. Our translator was dead. Poor bastard. A nice guy too, but it had to be tough on him, working with us. Someone cut his throat when he went home to visit his family. We said we would protect him when he signed up. A lie, of course. Surely he knew we didn't really give a shit about him, not as an army, not as a country. I liked him though. That was what, three nights ago? How the hell am I supposed to do my job without a translator? I don't speak Dari. The infantry guys don't. The Afghanis don't speak English, but why should they? They didn't expect us to come. Poor bastard, Amani. He was already my second translator. In four months. God, that's it? How many more caves and dead bodies will I have to see?

"Looks like your guy was right." Caplin says as they leave the tunnel. They have four prisoners, bound and, at least slightly, beaten.

"A lot of good it does him." I look at the body against the wall. I had promised him a lamb for his information. I would have got it too, somehow. That's all he wanted. The thugs out the cave and a lamb. I'm pretty sure it was for his son. Fucking Miller.

"Yeah, sorry about that. He's not alone. There's another three down there." He jerks his thumb at the tunnel. "For you." He hands me a packet of papers. "There's a stack of rifles and some ammo too. We'll give you a count when we get it."

"Thank you sergeant." Caplin follows his squad out of the cave. I am alone with the dead man again. He was a sheep herder. A father. Husband. I wonder if he told his son the United States was going to give him a lamb. I hope not. The boy is going to hate us enough.

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Alone I moved toward Abdullah, kneeling before him and reaching out to slide the turban from his face. His eyes were open. But

they were dead. It's amazing how you only notice the way life shines in the eyes when someone is dead. He seemed shrunken, unreal. There was an explosion outside. The sound of machine guns. Yelling. I was frozen, looking into Abdullah's eyes. The rest of it seemed distant. He was real.

Gradually it hit me. I rushed to the mouth of the cave, my thumb on the safety switch of my M4. One of the Humvees was in flames. Carlson and one of the prisoners lay motionless on the ground. Rifle fire from the western hills pelted the vehicles. The soldiers, huddled behind them, returned fire. Sergeant Caplin was wounded. A bloody bandage was wrapped around his shoulder, and he was talking to the medic, Simpson. The kid looked scared out of his mind, just sitting there staring, a packet of morphine in his hand. I wonder were he was, inside. Did it make things easier, less real? I heard it—God knows why I didn't turn—a footstep in the cave. Only dead men there. Simpson was crying now. Poor kid. He only came last week, from Omaha I think. Four strong hands grasp me from behind. The smell of chloroform. A cloth against my face. They are dragging me inside, and I know it, but I can't do anything. I have no control; of myself; of them. I sleep and swear the GIs cleared the cave.

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"Anything else?" Wilson asked.

"No, that's about it."

"And you still maintain they're harmless."

"Yes. You don't?"

"I'm not sure." He was thoughtful for a moment. "They're probably benign enough. Heck, lots of people talk about stuff like that. We can't lock them up for talking. It's their right to be socialist or communist. This isn't the fifties."

"You say that almost as if you wish it was."

"Nah. Just as long as they don't commit any crimes, I don't care. Let them talk." He turned thoughtful again, narrowed his eyes and then spoke firmly. "Roderick Anders."

"Yes?"

"Describe him for me."

"I don't know. Five nine, five ten. Average build. White. A beard; what do you call it, one like Trotsky had?"

"I don't know."

"You know what I mean though?"

"Yes."

"Green, almost gray eyes. Light brown hair. How detailed do you want me to get?"

"That's enough." He reached into his jacket and retrieved a piece of paper. Unfolding it, he handed it to me. "Do you know this man?"

"No." It was the face of a stranger, a large man with blond hair and a jolly face. "Should I?"

"That is Roderick Anders of Centralia, Washington. Your Roderick Anders has been using his identity since he arrived in Seattle."

"Curious."

"Indeed."

"No." I said after a moment of silence.

"What?"

"I know what you're going to ask. It is in your eyes. No."

"All we need is a name, or if not that, something little; a place, a childhood friend, you know, something to go on."

"What about his photo, surely you..."

"Yes, we ran it. Nothing. The guy is a complete unknown. What do you say? Wait." He held up his hand. "I'll call you tomorrow. Tell me then." He stood and held out his hand. Rising, I shook it.

"The answer is no Wilson." I said.

"Of course. It's good to see you again." We were at the door. I held it open. He paused before leaving. "Of course, if you help us out with this, you'll be compensated."

"I don't need your money Wilson."

"I know. I know. But maybe you want something else, say an honorable discharge."

"No deal Wilson."

"Think about it." He patted me on the shoulder and shuffled down the hall.

Later that evening I met Roderick at the Symphony. We had shared half a box for over a year, two seats each, though we often traded them between us and lent them out to friends. I arrived early to watch the people milling around the foyer with their false smiles and self important sense of culture. Not everyone was like that, of course, but enough. Really I liked watching for people who were there for the first time: the young teenage couple; the awkward father and son; the good blue-collared worker who never much cared for classical music but had been convinced by his wife, mother, daughter or son that it was a way to elevate himself, opening his mind to a greater world. How many men like him have been made to suffer through what they cannot stand in the name of culture? How many, too, discovered an appreciation for the art; a beauty?

Roderick was already there, leaning against the second balcony, talking to Clara. Her long black hair seemed unusually groomed, and she wore a black evening dress, entirely distinct from the t-shirt and jeans she usually wore. A glint of light made the ring beneath her lip sparkle, and I realized she was wearing make-up. As I neared I came to the conclusion that she looked better this way; more refined; polished I guess. She was still not attractive, but she had become pleasant. They were talking when I first saw them, but by the time I reached them, they had turned from the railing and were silent.

"Clara, you look splendid tonight." I swear she blushed. If so it's the most feminine thing I've ever seen from her. I shook her hand. "Roderick, how are you?"

"Good to see you again." He said as he took my hand. "It's been a few weeks. How are you?"

"Quite well, thank you. I just had a visit from an old friend."

"Really, anybody we know?"

"No, but he knows you."

"How's that?"

"FBI." Roderick barely batted an eye. Clara jumped, literally.

"You're serious, aren't you?" He said after a moment of silence. He was searching my face.

"Yes."

"Why tell me?"

"Why not? I haven't seen the guy for years, and he shows up asking about the PUF and about you."

“What did you tell him?” Clara said excitedly. I’m afraid the news ruined her night.

“Nothing he didn’t already know.”

“What was that?” She was tense – a true believer.

“How should I know? I don’t know what you guys are up to. I don’t want to know.”

“Do they know our names? Are they watching us?” She swiveled her head from side to side, as if trying to catch them spying.

“I don’t know. Could be. They know the four of you, especially Roderick, at least by what my friend told me. He showed me an interesting picture too.” Neither of them responded. “An old driver’s license photo of yours, I believe.” I said, addressing Roderick. A smile flashed on his face.

“The old one?” His eyes were mirthful. I nodded. “I barely look the same do I?” We both laughed. Clara was lost and was about to ask a question when Reagan joined us. She wore a polite smile, but I knew she despised Clara and was not fond of Roderick either.

“Who would like a drink? On me.” I asked the group. It was a custom with Roderick and I. I bought beforehand. He bought during intermission.

“Brandy.” Roderick answered first.

“Merlot, thank you.” Clara said graciously.

“Reagan,” I said before she could answer, “would you give me a hand? I know you just walked upstairs, but...”

“I’ll be fine, thank you.” She smiled and took my offered arm.

“See you in a few minutes.” I said in parting, glancing at the lines below and choosing the left staircase.

“Thanks.” Reagan said when we were out of ear shot. “I don’t know what it is about her.”

“Her eyes.” I said. “They scream fanaticism. How are you?”

“Good, thanks. You?”

“Fine. How’s the wedding planning coming along?”

“Don’t ask.” We were silent. The crowd around us buzzed incessantly. Snippets fell to my ear. “I heard on the news it will rain – a wonderful performance – I subscribed for the whole series – my daughter, the darling – so I said, that’s no way to – cut me off, the prick!” It bores into my head, these idle conversations, makes the music that much more beautiful in contrast. “Alan and I had a fight.” She continued.

"I'm sorry." I said. "You want to talk about it? We've got time; we could go outside."

"What about them?" She motioned upward with her head. I shrugged.

"We'll take up their drinks. Then we can go out if you want. If nothing else you won't have to talk to Clara." I smiled. At the front of the line now, I ordered the drinks. The clamor of the place was getting to me. It's too much when I have to nearly yell to order a glass of wine and a brandy. We took the drinks upstairs. It was quieter there, enough to think. "We're going to head out for a minute." I told them. Clara was still agitated, and Roderick was trying to calm her. He rubbed her back and spoke softly. As we took the turn in the stairs, I caught his eye. He nodded, friendly-like. I returned in kind. The scent of a woman's perfume overwhelmed as she passed. It smelled like peach blossoms and ginger.

"It is nice out here." Reagan said as we reached the street. We walked toward the water. A sea breeze played with her hair. It was pleasant after the being inside Benaroya. We sat beneath a tree and were quiet. I really didn't care if we talked. It felt good, there beside her. "I don't think I love him." She said at last.

"Alan?"

"Yes." A few raindrops sprinkled through the trees, and I realized she was alone, not in person, but inside. She was reaching out, outside herself; outside the realm we all exist in where we do what is expected of us; what we have come to expect of ourselves. "Is that wrong?"

"To not love someone?" Her eyes were locked on mine, but she was distant. I answered slowly. "I don't think so." She remained silent. "Does he know?"

"No, I don't think so." She tried to smile. "I don't think I ever have loved him. It has been a lie, every time, when I said I did. Maybe he's known all along. Maybe he doesn't really love me either. People say all the time that they love each other, but what does that mean, really? It's just something expected; something we need to tell people so they feel better about themselves – so they will say it to us and we can feel better about ourselves."

"What will you do?" I said after a moment. It was hard to watch someone lose faith in love.

"I don't know." We were silent for awhile. The symphony was about to begin. "We should go in." She said.

"We don't have to, if you don't want to."

"I do. I like coming here with you." She smiled, almost shyly, before rising. We walked inside, reaching the hallway doors at the last moment. As we reached our seats, the musicians finished tuning and the lights were dimmed.

"Perfect timing." Roderick said, slapping my knee. He still seemed in a jovial mood. "You gave her quite a fright." He motioned to Clara. She sat on the far side of him, staring into her own thoughts. "It is good for her." He smiled playfully. The conductor took the stage; the instruments broke into song.

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Alexander Spinoza stood at the corner of Fifth and Pike with a video camera held to his eye. It was drizzling, but he stood motionless, filming two seagulls fight over a scrap of bread. He wore a light green raincoat with the hood cinched tight over the burgundy sailor's cap he always wore outdoors. The pockets of his fleece cargo pants bulged with unseen contents, most likely a digital camera, light meter and telescoping tripod. He was always attempting to find art in the ordinary. He was fascinated with machines and the people that ran them as if they were a function of the machine. Awhile back a gallery showed a series of photographs he had taken of men working at the cargo docks. In high contrast black and white his images gave the modern longshoremen the look of nineteenth century coal miners. In another series he examined, in the same black and white, the hands of various tradesmen and menial workers. I still recall the short stubby fingers of a carpenter, the worn hands of a dishwasher, the stained skin of a berry picker and, in contrast, the finely manicured tips of an anonymous banker. It was an outstanding show, complete with a short film comprised of various laborers in their most grueling moments juxtaposed with the luxury of some of Seattle's most elite hotels and public places. It was an effective piece of social commentary without falling into the triviality of being repetitive of the great many pieces of art to speak against social inequality. It was subtle but also striking. I am sure only a handful of people watched it.

The seagulls had gone. Alexander cleaned the lens of his camera before covering it and sliding the machine into a small courier bag beneath his raincoat. Crossing the street, he entered the coffee

shop. Removing the hood and his cap, he shook his head. From his trouser pocket he retrieved his wire framed glasses and put them on. Blinking, he approached the counter and ordered plain black coffee. He spoke softly, as was his way, and did not look the barista in the eye. He was intensely shy, a short man whose hero was Trotsky and life resembled some sort of waking dream.

Turning from the counter, he saw me by the window and ambled over. "Mind if I join you?" He asked politely.

"Please do." I sat a little straighter to give him leg room. "How are you?"

"A little wet." He smiled; a sly smile as he always had, with only one side of his mouth raised.

"Why don't you take your coat off?"

"Well, I've got to be going pretty soon." He began to unbutton his raincoat.

"Get a good shot of the seagulls?" I asked.

"You saw them?" He took off his raincoat and laid it on the chair beside him. He removed his video camera from his bag and turned it on. "Hmm. Looks like it turned out all right. I won't be able to tell for sure until I see it on a bigger screen."

"Mind if I look?" He handed me the camera. Miniature seagulls playing in the rain. "It looks good."

"It's okay."

"Is it for anything in particular?"

"No. Just for fun. I'll put it in my archives." He had thousands of clips he had recorded over the years, never knowing when they might be useful. For money he filmed weddings and other events. He hated it. "Say." He paused for a long time. "Is it true the FBI talked to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you think they'll arrest us?"

"Not if you don't do anything. You have the right to speak. Make a film. Write a story. They can't throw you in jail for that."

"Are they're watching us?"

"I don't know."

Alexander was quiet. Suddenly he rose from the chair, took his coat and camera and left with only a short bow in terms of goodbye. After he was gone, I shrugged my shoulders, sipped my tea and watched the rain. I began to feel warm inside. Then my phone rang.

"Agent Wilson." I said, recognizing his voice on the other end of the line. "How may I be of service?"

"Have you decided?"

"What? Oh, that. I haven't thought about it." He started to say something, but I cut him off. "You should know I told them I talked to you."

"What?" His voice sounded indignant.

"And I told Roderick about the picture."

"What the hell for?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter, you know."

"That depends. What did they say?"

"I think it has them nervous, except for Roderick. He seemed amused."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I can't figure it. Say, should we be talking about this on the phone?"

"It shouldn't matter, but no. So, are you in or out?"

"You still want my help?"

"Yes."

"I'm in."

"I'll be in touch."

"Hey Wilson, before you go."

"Yes?"

"I'm not going to lie to them."

"What do you mean?"

"That I won't lie; not for them; not for you."

"You have to take a side." He was annoyed.

"No. I don't think so. Look Wilson, you're the one that wants my help. I'll tell you anything I know, just be aware I will tell them what I told you if they ask."

"Fine." His voice was normal again. "I just don't see what you're after."

"Nothing Wilson. Always nothing. You're after something. They're after something. I am after nothing. Remember that. You have anything else?"

"No. I'll be in touch. Let me know if you get his name." The line went dead. The rain was falling harder now.

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When the chloroform wore off I was being carried through a tunnel. My hands were bound. In my mouth, a rag. They made me walk. I stumbled. One of the men held me up and said something in Dari. He sounded like he was nice. We left the caves, and I found myself on a horse, a blindfold around my eyes. In the darkness the world passed. It was like a wave. Small arms fired in the distance. Then the deathly roar of an Apache's guns, and everything was quiet. We were riding in the shade. The bleating of sheep. A dust storm. The smell of poppy fields. How many days had passed like this, rocking back and forth in the dark? I could not feel the horse. I could not feel anything. Trapped in darkness long enough the body ceases to exist. My lips were swollen from the cloth in my mouth. They felt like lesions. Then they disappeared. I had to move my foot to verify it was real. When we stopped, I felt like I was falling. They removed the gag and fed me something I had never had before. I have no reference. The water tasted dirty.

I did not notice for some time that the horse was gone and I was in an automobile. Two men were carrying on a conversation beside me. From time to time they burst out in laughter. I am pretty sure I was drugged. It was hard to feel; to know who I was or what it meant to be alive. If I had been told I was going to die, I would not have cared.

Eventually we arrived somewhere. I had been asleep, I believe. It was hard to tell. When in motion long enough, the body forgets what it is like to be still. After enough time spent in darkness, one begins to forget the light. I was somewhere else. A place where I could fly; where I could dart butterfly-like through the sky and pluck sweet fruits from the greatest of trees. I felt alive there; much more than sitting blindfolded, motionless.

-11-

"It changes nothing." Roderick said definitively. "We'll just be more careful."

"What if they arrest us?" Karl asked. The entire PUF was together in Clara's apartment. Roderick lived there too, had for nearly two years, but still continued to call it her apartment. She told me

once, deep down, she still expected him to walk out on her someday. "He will never love me." She said. "He only loves ideas. And himself." She was drunk and called him narcissistic and vain. "But I'd give my life for him." She added seriously. I believe she told the truth.

"You've known jail was a possibility from the beginning." Roderick answered Karl.

"Afterwards, of course, but what about beforehand?"

"You keep your mouth shut." It was Clara that answered. Alexander took a hit from the pipe and passed it to Roderick. He coughed as he exhaled. The room was dark except for a lamp behind Roderick's chair. Alexander and Karl sat on a dumpy old couch with an orange and brown calico pattern. Clara had inherited it from her mother when she moved to the U District during her sophomore year in college. She grew up in south Everett. Her mother was a waitress at a small casino on Highway 99. She never knew her father. She was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed like Buddha.

"Can you imagine," Alexander burst out suddenly, "what it is like to have to work two jobs; I mean really work?"

"No one should have to." Clara said curtly.

"I know, but can you imagine it? Waking up, say, at six. Assembling some stupid gadget from seven 'til four, then mopping floors five 'til, I don't know, midnight. Then sleep five-six hours and do the same fucking thing again, day after day after day. Can you imagine it?"

"It's a travesty." Roderick said seriously.

"Can you imagine?" Alexander's voice was loud, feverish. He was apt to work himself into such moods. Excitement made his face turn red.

"Goddamn capitalism!" Karl added. This had become a catch-all phrase for him. People suffer. Blame capitalism. Beautiful girl ignores you. Blame capitalism. Rain, why not.

"Fucking corporate pigs, trodding on the working man." Clara chimed in.

"Can you imagine it?" Alexander was looking at his hands. They were soft. In all his life they had never held a mop or been blistered from repetitive friction. He had never held an axe or swung a bail of hay onto a truck. He remembered the hands in his photographs. The calluses were badges of a life he had never experienced. He had plucked a tomato from his father's vine, but he could never imagine picking a thirty-two pound bucket full, not even

once, let alone dozens of times each day—so many times his fingers would turn black and a photographer would ask to catalogue them to show what it is like to suffer. He had not suffered. “Life is suffering.” A Buddhist once told him. It was not true, not in his case anyway. And those others, did they suffer? The man with the stained black fingers was one of the most jovial men he had ever met. He invited Alexander into his communal shack for a beer. They played cards ‘til midnight, and Alexander fell asleep on the floor beside a handful of workers. Before dawn the pickers were gone. Alexander slept until noon, walked to his car and began the long drive to town. In the fields the workers were hunched over the plants, their strong arms in ceaseless motion. Did they suffer? He could not know.

-12-

“Do you ever feel empty?” Reagan asked. The symphony was over. We were still in our seats, waiting for the crowd to leave. Roderick and Clara were gone. She stared at the vacant stage.

“Yeah.”

“You know what I mean?” She turned to me. In the dim light her eyes were large, pleading.

“I think so. But tell me anyway.”

“Listening to the music,” she said after a pause, “I kept thinking of a dream I don’t remember. It feels like it is playing just out of reach; just beyond my sight. But the strangest thing is, it seems more real than reality.” She slouched back in her chair. “I just don’t know what I’m doing. No, that’s not it. I don’t know what I ought to do.”

We were silent. After the usher passed the door a third time we rose and headed for the street. “Want to grab a drink?” I asked.

“Yes, but I don’t want to go anywhere. I don’t want to be around people.”

“You want to drink alone?”

“No.”

“I’ve got a bottle of rum in my cupboard.”

“Lead on my friend.”

-13-

In my condo we sat drinking shots. "I want to get drunk." She said when we started. "Blind fucking drunk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

We were on our fourth shot before another word was said. Ten minutes had passed. "How do you feel?" I asked.

"Worse."

"We can stop."

"No. I want to suffer. I want to feel something."

"Is this really the way?" She shrugged her shoulders and poured another round.

"I want to forget." We drank.

"What do you want to forget?"

"Everything. I just want to be this moment, not all the moments before or those to come." She poured.

"And being drunk accomplishes this how?"

"It doesn't." We drank. She was beginning to sway. Her eyes had taken on a glazed smile. "Did I ever tell you I wanted to ride horses, when I was a girl? You know, at fancy shows, with a red coat and one of those funny black hats and the little strap around the chin?"

"No."

"I did. I dreamed and dreamed about it; about the horse I would have. A white one. It had to be white. Her name would be Snow Angel."

"A nice name for a horse."

"I thought so. Snow Angel and I, what fun we would have. What fun. I've never ridden a horse. That dream died. I want to feel that again. That hope I had as a child. I want a friend like Snow Angel. Someone I can truly love like I did her. And don't tell me she wasn't real. You can't love something unless it's real. You can't." She poured herself a drink and downed it. "Do you know why I came here?" I shook my head. I'm not sure if she noticed. "I wanted to tell you that I love you. But I don't. You're not real, not like Snow Angel was." She took the bottle and finished it off. When she set it down she was crying. "You know," she said after a moment, "I'd hoped we'd fuck." Then, blindly, she staggered to the couch and threw herself on the cushions. I covered her with a blanket and went to bed.

-14-

There are blanks in my memory. Most are from alcohol. A few from drugs. No matter how many times people tell me stories of those times, I cannot remember. There are a few blanks caused by injury; brief moments of unconsciousness in which I moved and breathed without knowledge of myself; the erasure of painful moments of impact; of concussions and unexpected sleep. It is not so different from sleep walking, I suppose, to drunkenly meander through life without the record button of your mind depressed, or to stumble about concussed, the body still functioning but mind dispossessed. I forget too the end of my journey in darkness. I remember the separation of self and body after the long weary hours on horseback. I remember recognition that I was in a vehicle, now stopping, now in motion. But then my memory vanishes. I may have been asleep. Perhaps. I have no way to know, but something tells me I was awake, at least part of the time, but that I made no memory. It may have been weeks they moved me about in the dark. It may have been hours. I cannot remember.

-15-

I awoke in a room without windows, and I remember thinking, why would someone build such a room? It was not a prison cell. The floors were carpeted with rugs, and the walls showed signs of habitation; nicks and holes from shelves and wall hangings. No, it was a home at some point. People laughed here. People slept and ate here. But why no windows? It confused me, and I dwelt on it. I rubbed my chin in thought. My hands were unbound. My face was covered with a growth of beard. My mouth was dry.

In the corner was a wooden bucket, for a toilet I supposed. I turned it over and sat on it. Overhead a single light bulb buzzed and occasionally would blink. Later there would be blackouts and the room would be entirely dark.

"Why are there no windows?" I asked the first time I was given my daily ration of porridge and goat's milk. The man did not understand, but he smiled. He had a kind face; simple eyes which did not judge. Perhaps this was his house, I thought. I asked him his

name. He did not answer. The second day I touched my chest and said my name, then pointed to him, the way they do in movies. He shook his head, not unkindly, which I took to mean that it wasn't worth his time to say. So I gave him a name. I began to greet him with, "Good day Rupert, how are you?" He would shake his head, hand me my food and exchange my wooden bucket for a clean one before leaving. I would often speak to him the entire two minutes he was in the room. It was hard not to.

"Oh, it's a fine day today Rupert." I told him once. "You know what I was just thinking about? No? About Kabul." He understood that, I am sure of it. "Have you been there? Hell, we could be there now I suppose. Anyway, I was thinking." And he was gone. I would turn the clean bucket over, sit on it and eat half of my meal. The next few hours were spent protecting my remaining meal from flies. After a few days I would take my shirt off and cover the bowls. I would sit there half naked (they had taken my BDU top), doze and wonder when they would interrogate me and whether they would torture me. Maybe they would simply kill me. I wonder if they would behead me or just shoot me? It must be a strange sensation to lose your head. I wonder if it's true you can still see for a moment after it happens? How could that be proven without beheading people?

"What's your name soldier?" A young Afghani with only the first wisps of a curly black beard sat on the ground facing me. I told him my name.

"I am Achmed." He held out his hand. I shook it. The feel of another person felt strange. Was he real? "Yes." He said.

"What?"

"You asked if I was real. I am." I didn't know whether to believe him. I didn't remember saying anything out loud. The door opened and an older man entered. His face was grave. It made sense suddenly. All these days there had been no one to speak English. The two men conversed. Finally they turned to me. "He says he will ask you questions. If you do not lie, everything will be okay. Understand?"

"Yes."

"What is your job?" He translated.

"Engineer – a surveyor." The lie slid off my tongue.

"What were you doing in the cave?"

"Surveying it for demolition."

"Why did you have our papers?"

"What?"

"You had a packet of papers, maps and things, when they took you. Why did you have them?"

"Sergeant Hamlin asked me to hold them. I never knew what they were." The old man stared at me intently.

"Did you kill anyone?"

"In the cave? No; I've never killed anyone."

"Ever?"

"No, thank God. I don't want to either."

"Why did you come here?"

"You brought me here."

"To Afghanistan."

"I had no choice."

"Why don't you go home – you – all of you?" The older man was talking vehemently. Achmed did not translate. When the diatribe ended, the man stormed out of the room. "His son was killed in that cave." Achmed said slowly. "I think he will let you live. He is a good man." He smiled meekly and rose to his feet.

-16-

It was three in the morning. I was awake, lying in bed, cradling the words, "judge not lest ye be judged," wondering what constitutes judgment and how incapable I was of removing judgment from my world-view unless I ceased entirely to think of anyone beyond myself. I had been gnawing on the concept for hours, drifting between the realms of half-sleep and reason. Reagan coughed in the living room. I thought little of it and fell into an odd dream where I seemed to be a seal, except instead of water I swam through the sky, tracing a giant loop. It was grand. I was awakened by a crash in the living room and the sound of Reagan stumbling to the bathroom. The door open, I heard her vomit. The second time I got up. I turned the hall light on and watched her a moment before slowly approaching.

Wordless, I sat on the bathtub's edge and held her hair while she vomited. Between fits I rubbed her back. She still wore her dress from the symphony. It was spotted with stomach acid. After awhile she leaned against the tub and let her head fall against my leg. The

worst of it was over. I wondered if that was what she wanted when she said she wanted to suffer.

I sat there awhile, watching her doze off. My leg began to fall asleep, and I gently maneuvered myself so her head was against my chest as I knelt beside her. She murmured in her sleep. As delicately as I could, I picked her up and carried her to my bedroom. When she was tucked into bed, I took the comforter and retreated to the couch.

-17-

"I think he will let you live." The words stayed with me. I always knew they might kill me, but it was far off, as if it was happening to someone else. It was real now. This was happening to me. The sight of Abdullah hung in my mind; the way his dead body reclined against the contours of the cave. I killed him; not with any gun or sword but with my words. Who was I to endanger his life? For what cause had I done so? When Rupert brought me my meal I did not talk to him. I did not eat.

It began to rain. I did not notice for awhile, but eventually I became aware of a small drip from the ceiling, over near the corner of the room. It annoyed me. When the rain intensified, so did the drip. I walked toward it and looked up. There was light. Nervously glancing toward the door I stood on the overturned bucket and put my finger in the hole. A clump of rotten roof broke off in my hand.

What the next hour was like I cannot accurately tell. My fingers bled. My nerves wore thin with desperation. I glanced at the door continuously. I was drenched. The further I wore away at the opening, the more rain fell in. I drank the goat's milk for strength. The hole grew agonizingly slow. My fingertips were numb. Then a crash. Chunks of roof scattered on the floor. Tossing aside the small piece in my hand, I leapt out of the hole, my chest crashing against the edge. For a moment I hung there, my legs dangling—a vision of dying like that flashed through my mind—I struggled to pull myself upward. In the twilight of the storm I could see the shadowy outlines of mountains. I was on the roof, my stomach bleeding from where it caught a splinter. As I leapt to the ground I heard the door open. There was yelling in Dari. I was thankful there was no window in that room.

Part Two

-18-

"They're gone." Wilson's voice was concerned.

"Who?"

"All four of them – the PUF."

"So?"

"Something's odd about it."

"Have you been surveilling them?"

"I can't talk about that."

"I know. Maybe they went camping."

"None of them drove."

"You are surveilling them. What on earth for? I told you last week, they're harmless."

"Could you call one of them?"

"I guess, but if they're smart enough to vanish like that, they wouldn't answer a call from me. Call me back in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks." The line went dead. I yawned and rolled back over in bed. I glanced at the phone. Seven thirty. What was he doing at work already? I closed my eyes and began to drift back into my dreams. The phone rang. I answered without opening my eyes.

"No answer." I said and was set to press the end button when I heard Reagan's voice.

"What?"

"Sorry, thought you were someone else. How are you?" I opened my eyes and rolled onto my back.

"Okay." It was a lie. "I'm sorry for calling so early."

"No worries."

"Thanks." Silence.

"What is it Reagan?"

"Can I – are we okay, after last week? I said some things." We had not spoken since she slipped out of my condo the morning after the symphony.

"We're fine. We'll always be fine as far as I'm concerned."

"Thanks."

"What did you want to ask?"

"Can I crash on your couch for awhile?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

"Is it okay if I bring some things over now?"

"Of course; what's wrong?" She had stifled a sob.

"Nothing now. We can talk about it later. I'll see you in a bit. Bye." As soon as she was off the line the phone rang again. It was Wilson. I sat up in bed and answered it.

"I haven't tried yet Wilson. Give me ten minutes." I tried Karl. No answer. The same with Roderick. Alexander did not have a phone. I had Clara's cell written down somewhere but wasn't about to go looking for it. "No answer." I told Wilson when he called back. "They could be sleeping though."

"Not in their own homes."

"Well it's not a crime to sleep somewhere else."

"Let me know if you hear from any of them. Find out where they were."

-19-

Near a sprawling Virginia cigarette factory, a black Jeep Cherokee pulled to the side of the road and turned its lights off. It was the deep of night. A few minutes passed before the doors opened and four individuals stepped out. They congregated at the trunk, where they each retrieved a backpack and a can of gasoline. Silently they crept into the shadows.

Reaching the factory's chain-link fence, they paused. A pair of bolt cutters emerged from one of the backpacks, and in the shade of a Sycamore, one of the three men cut a section from the fence. They filed through after donning ski caps to cover their faces. One of these bore a Boston Red Sox logo. The others were blank. They ran the few meters to the side of a large warehouse. Its lights were turned off, though the factory itself was operating. The parking lot on the far side was half full. One man left the group and worked his way toward the factory, darting from shadow to shadow in an attempt to avoid the security cameras.

The other three, two men and a woman, forced their way into the warehouse through a window. Inside bales of tobacco were stacked to the ceiling. One of the men located a shut-off valve for the

fire sprinklers and wound the wheel to the off position. He joined the others on top of the mountain of tobacco. Near the center of the warehouse they emptied the gas cans over the bales. This done, they retreated some fifty feet and waited. One of the men held a lighter. The other a Molotov cocktail. After a few minutes there was a whistle from the window.

“There’s the signal.” The woman said.

“Okay go.” She began her descent from the mound. The bottle was lit and thrown to where they had dumped the gasoline. Flames erupted, and the two men scrambled after her.

“Ready?” The third man asked when they joined him outside. The others nodded, and they ran towards the Jeep. At the fence he paused and retrieved a remote detonator from his pocket. He pulled the antenna out, flipped the safety off and turned the knob. An explosion ripped through the factory’s power transfer station and the entire grounds went dark. The fire was visible inside the warehouse. The four comrades ran to their vehicle and sped away.

-20-

She was a pitiful sight, standing in the doorway with a box in her arms, looking at the ground, a large welt across her left cheek. I took the box and set it inside. She smiled self consciously and entered. I was staring at her, at the red mark. When she at last looked at me it was not what I expected.

“Yes he hit me.” She said plainly. My jaw clenched tight. “And you’ll do nothing about it. No one will.” I opened my mouth to protest. She cut me off. “Turn the other cheek, you know.” Her eyes looked into the distance. “I did it, literally. His face; I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Do you want some ice?” I had to accept it. It was odd though – she was an atheist – for her to use that device.

“No. I think I’m okay. Will you go back with me, to get the rest of my things? I don’t ever want to see him again.”

“Of course Reagan. Now?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.” When we got to her place Alan was gone. “It happened right here.” She said, standing near the center of the kitchen. “You know,” she said some time later, as we packed up her kitchen things, “I envy you.”

"Me?"

"You don't care about anything. It must be nice." I did not answer. She smiled at me. "You're good to me though. I just don't know if you're a good person." She laughed. I smiled and picked up a box.

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know." She turned serious. "As long as I've known you, it has always seemed like you've been pretending; as if there is a part of you, an important part, no one else gets to see."

"That's true of everyone."

"Yes, but it's different with you. Whatever is inside you, I've always had the impression it's more real to you than anything else. That's why I said I don't know whether you're a good person. You always act like it, but inside, I don't know. Though I get the impression that you're empty in a way, maybe constrained."

The front door rattled, and like too many conversations on the cusp of complete honesty, this one fell. Alan walked into the room, stopped and looked at us.

"So you're here." He said looking at me. "Mind giving us a moment alone?"

"Tell him," Reagan said, turning to me before I could possibly answer, "I never want to speak to him again."

"Reagan!" Alan tried to interrupt.

"And that," she continued, still looking at me, "I'm taking my things now, and it would be better if he would leave." With this she began to sort through pots and pans, leaving his on the shelf and placing hers on the ground.

"Reagan, I wanted to apologize." He said meekly, glancing at me and then back at her. She ignored him. "Damn it, I'm sorry. I – I don't know what came over me." Cold silence. Alan stood with his mouth open, pleading to her back. He took half a step toward her, stopped and looked at me. "This is your fault!" He sniped accusingly, pointing his finger at me. "You damn – damn – anarchist!" His face was ugly with confusion and rage. I offered no response, and after a futile moment of looking bewildered, he left.

"It's odd," Reagan said after a few minutes of silence, "how so much of your life can be wrapped up in one other person, then, like that, they repulse you and you cannot understand how you ever spent so much time with them. I don't hate Alan. He's just a stranger now; one of those people you see walking down the street and you think, 'I

could never be that person's friend.' Understand? I wish him the best in life, the same as all those strangers; just I want to be no part of it."

When we left the apartment she set her engagement ring on the kitchen table. Alan vanished from our lives.

-21-

It creeps back sometimes; the memory of those days in the mountains of Afghanistan, lost, hungry; pursued, perhaps. After I climbed through the roof I ran into the rainstorm without looking back, expecting at any moment for bullets or headlights to chase after me. They did not.

I did not stop running for more than an hour. The wound on my stomach, which turned out to be little more than a scrape, had stopped bleeding. Night had come, and I was drenched. Vainly I looked for shelter. The land was bare.

I crouched between two boulders, leaning back on one from time to time in hopes I might find sleep. Water would pool where my shoulders met the stone and rush in spurts along my arms. Sitting up I would shiver and stare at the muddy ground, wanting to lie down, to sleep. I tried. The ground was cold with water and seeped into my skin. My thin t-shirt provided no warmth. I squatted again, my arms tucked inside my shirt. I reached a hand out to wipe the water from my eyes, where it dripped from saturated eyebrows. My feet ached, my calves. I stood and jumped up and down to warm myself. I squatted and lowered my forehead against one of the boulders. I moved forward to my knees and drifted into the nether regions of sleep, only to awaken with a fit of shivering. I tucked my hands into my pants and dozed again. The stone smelled faintly of mold, and I felt feverish. My knees, soaking up the chill from the mud, became stiff, and I had to stand again; to dance about and curse the falling skies.

This went on all night, moment by moment, each of which was an entity clear unto itself; a memory I could relate with greater accuracy than any of those I have already described; the sensation of each raindrop burrowing into my skin; the frightful chattering of my teeth, uncontrollable, or the gnawing hunger which, at the moment, made me feel incomparably empty. Volumes. I might fill volumes with the endlessness of that one night, but what would be the point of that?

Everyone knows how time slows at some moments, thoughts retreat and the present is agonizingly beautiful and horrendous in its passing. It was nearly dawn when the rain stopped, and by the time I collapsed in the drying mud, the sun had shown its rosy head.

-22-

"Four days ago in ----, Virginia, a warehouse at a cigarette factory burned to the ground." Wilson opened a folder and slid a photo across his desk. He had insisted I come to his office. The picture showed the warehouse's charred remains.

"Okay."

"A small bomb was also detonated. It destroyed the electrical transfer hub for the factory." He showed me a photo of this as well. I looked at him questioningly. "Two days prior," he continued, "a similar bomb detonated at American Media Incorporated's headquarters in Boca Raton, Florida. They publish tabloids, Star Magazine, the Globe, stuff like that." He searched my face for a reaction. There were more photos. "Three months ago the phone systems of eight telemarketing companies in the Los Angeles area mysteriously shut down on the same day. The property damage was minimal, but it took the phone companies a few days to fix the lines. Last month, five telemarketing companies in Minneapolis. A few days later a St. Louis factory that produces plastic novelty items was bombed. Same M.O. No casualties. Only the power supply for the factory." He looked at me intently. "Well?"

"What?"

"I've read your book." He let this hang in the air. "You describe these attacks. They were all your idea."

"People write a lot of things in books Wilson. They're just words."

"Certainly. I'm sure it is just coincidence. I'm sure your PUF friends were just camping, like you said last week."

"You think they're responsible for this?" I swept my hand over the photographs. "Based on what? Because I know them and I wrote a book?"

"There's more, of course, but if I may?" He took a copy of my book from his desk. He opened it and cleared his throat. "The institutions," he read, "of immoral capitalism must first be felled if a

new perspective is to take hold of American culture – if citizens are to be awakened to the fact that they are first and foremost human beings and that to feel is infinitely more important than to compete... There must be a human morality, not of any religion or law but of basic human understanding and empathy, which inhibits usury – that prevents parasitic manipulation by corporations through the use of advertising and the subversion of human decency by the exultation of decadence in the media and in entertainment.

"It goes on," he added, "but you know that, of course. I don't quite know what you're getting at, but I know this character, this Anonymous Being as you call him, goes on to attack a tobacco plant, a tabloid press, a telemarketing conglomerate, a, what was it, a maker of 'third-rate plastic toys that cost twenty cents and break within five minutes of normal childhood play,' as well as a lobbyist's office and a few other things."

"Yes, and if you read the entire book, you'd remember in the end he realizes these actions have no discernable effect on the system and stops of his own accord. That book is not about violence."

"But it is about change?"

"Yes."

"And you don't find it possible your friends in the PUF are carrying out these attacks?"

"Hell if I know. Why would they? They're socialists. What's burning cigarette plants and bombing publishers got to do with the working man?"

"Control. You say that yourself in your book. 'Devices for controlling the mindset of a culture,' you call them."

"Wait, why tell me all this?"

"Like you said, it's not a crime to write a book, to think or even talk about these kinds of actions, but the moment a law is broken, or attempted to be broken, it is a crime. And, if they're responsible for all these acts, they fall under my jurisdiction."

"That doesn't explain why you've involved me."

"Roderick Anders."

"We've been through that. I don't know who he really is."

"Yes, but I might, and it is in the Bureau's interest to find out as much information about him as possible."

"Even if in the meantime a bit of corporate terrorism takes place?"

"It's not terrorism if no one is afraid, not really. They're merely a series of isolated criminal acts in various parts of the country. Until the press figures it out, we don't need to worry about arresting anyone." We were staring at each other. It felt like we were sharing a secret, but I don't know what it might have been.

"This has nothing to do with me Wilson. Not you. Not them."

"You keep saying that."

"It's true."

"Yet you can't walk away. You're involved. You don't know how quite yet, but you're involved. I may not know you well but well enough that you'll see this through."

"I've been getting a lot of that lately."

"What?"

"People telling me things about myself."

"Such as?"

"Apparently I'm an anarchist."

"I wouldn't have guessed that, not after reading this." He held up my book.

"You can't believe everything you read in a book."

"No but you can get a sense of someone. Only certain people can write certain things."

"True. I didn't realize you were a literary philosopher Wilson."

"Hardly." He laughed. "I barely read, other than reports. I don't have time."

"What do you do anyway, other than work?"

"Not much. Golf here and there. I catch the odd ballgame."

"When's the last time you had a vacation?"

"Last year. I visited my parent's in Florida for a week. It was nice. Really, it was. I don't know; I like my job. I don't need a whole lot."

"Don't you think that will change? What about a girlfriend?"

"I went on a date a couple months ago."

"That's it?"

"When I was in Minneapolis, I dated a girl for a couple years, off and on. Lindsay."

"What happened?"

"Just kind of drifted apart." He looked away.

"You miss her don't you?" He didn't answer. "Don't forget to live Wilson. Don't get me wrong, it's great what you're doing, trying

to protect people and all, but you can't forget to live, to feel. No matter how hard you work, it's all empty if you can't enjoy life."

"But if I work hard enough, I can save lives."

"Why you?"

"I don't follow."

"Why do you have to be the one to work so hard? Isn't the safety of a community, great or small, the responsibility of everyone, through inhibiting ourselves and prohibiting others from acts against our cohesive morals?"

"Morals change."

"But what it is to be human does not."

"I have no idea what that's supposed to mean." He chuckled. "What the hell are we talking about anyway?"

"You are convincing me I'm not an anarchist, and I am convincing you that you work too much. What are you doing tonight? Working?"

"I don't have anything planned, but."

"Good, you're going to a poetry reading."

"A what?"

"Poetry reading. Be at my place by seven."

"I don't even like poetry."

"It doesn't matter. It's something new, right. You've got to try understand other people, especially people doing things you don't like. Besides, it's better than sitting at home watching TV or reading reports. Trust me."

"Okay, I'll go. At seven?"

"Around then. The place is just around the corner. You have anything else for me? I haven't eaten lunch yet."

"It's almost four o'clock."

"Okay."

He shook his head. "No, I don't." He smiled. "You're an odd one you know."

It hit me when I arrived home. Perhaps it was seeing Reagan's things stacked around the apartment or maybe it took that long for my mind to digest the things I had been telling Wilson, but it hit me, standing there in the doorway: I was not real. Reagan was right.

Sure, I breathe, I eat, touch and feel things, but I wasn't real, not like other people. I tried to shake it off. It did not help. I felt isolated, but that was not it. I felt I needed to be isolated; that the way the world operated, the way people lived, was incompatible with the way I perceived the world. I had no expectations. Society was filled with them. I was filled with them when I spoke to Wilson. Yet now, alone, they fell. I saw clearly how absurdly unreal culture was; how arbitrary—life was about something else. Life was about moments, good and bad. Life was about moments. It made no sense. I closed the door and walked inside. I wanted to no longer be human; to be free from the need to feed myself; free from the need to sleep or think. To be animal. To survive. It was all false; this chair, this stereo, this countertop. Why had so many people spent so much time to prepare these things? They were meaningless. I closed my eyes and remembered nothing – a vague conception of the amalgamation of the life I had sensed; all those moments mashed into one empty sensation. Then another. What does it mean to feel? To truly perceive? It bothered me. I was a different person when I spoke with Wilson. It bothered me I would soon be someone else. But more so the thought that as different as I was now, so too were all individuals in their thoughts. Or so I imagined; hoped? It went on, this unbearable division of selves, this being human.

There is a reason people fear isolation. You know yourself in a different way. You think thoughts, raise morals, you will never live up to in the presence of others. Things like, "I will never insult anyone again." You will. You promise yourself to be understanding; to be patient and consider your words carefully, yet in public your tongue runs freely and you are ignorant, rash. Your ideals of solitude fall in the challenge of acting by them. You are like a dog, wagging your tail in excitement over every new face, every new smell or rustle of the wind. Where is your contemplation then? Where is the dog's dream? Damn it, why do we ever have to be alone; to learn there is another side to this life which once revealed cannot be ignored or fully reconciled with the other? Solitude is a drug. It creeps in when you close your eyes, takes hold, confuses things.

"Hey." Reagan called as she came in.

"Hi. How was your day?" The line of thoughts vanished. These five simple spoken words outweighed them. Yet part of me longed to continue the introspection. There is always hope that some truth may be found; something that will provide a positive influence

on the future actions of the interactive self. Mostly I was glad to see my friend.

"Pretty good, thanks. Yours?"

"Good. Haven't done much of anything, but good." It has always amazed me the way one's perspective changes. If someone else was there, I would be different still from who I was with her; from who I was alone. It takes all these versions together to make a person. I sometimes forget that. "How was work?" She stuck out her tongue.

"I'm sick of it."

"Quit." She looked at me wistfully.

"I can't; you know, bills to pay, all that."

"Fuck it. Quit. Take a vacation." She laughed. "I'm serious. Come with me. Let's go to India, Australia, wherever you like. I'll pay for everything." Our eyes were locked. She opened her mouth twice but did not speak.

"It's a nice idea." She said at last. A pause. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where did this come from?"

"I just thought of it." Silence.

"How? I couldn't let you pay. And what about when I get back?"

"What if we don't come back, not for a long time? We just hop on a plane and go." Her eyes had not moved from mine. There was a struggle going on behind them. I didn't think of it then, but I was asking her to trust me; to become dependent.

"But how could you afford it?" She said after a minute. "I don't even know how you afford to live here. You haven't worked since you came back to town." My eyes struggled.

"I have the money." I paused. "And if it is important, I will tell you how. But do you want to go?"

"Yes, but," she looked away, "it's a lot to take in. It would be nice though." She looked back at me. There was a knock at the door.

"Think about it." I said moving to the door. "Hey Wilson. This is Reagan. Reagan, Wilson."

"Nice to meet you." Wilson said, extending his hand. Reagan took it and smiled.

"We're going to a poetry reading." I informed her. "Want to come?"

"Thank you, no." She said slowly. "I've got some thinking to do." Her eyes met mine, and we shared a smile.

"She seems nice." Wilson said in the elevator. "Your girlfriend?"

"No."

"She looks at you like she is." I looked at him out of the corner of my eye.

"We're close. We've known each other a long time."

"Fair enough. So, can we get a drink at this place?"

"It's a coffee shop, but we can stop at a bar if you want a drink."

"It's not necessary. What is this reading anyway? Anyone famous?"

"No. Just an open mic. Random people reading random things. Some good. Some bad. It takes guts, though, to get up in front of strangers like that." We chatted at random as we walked. It was a little awkward. I was thinking about Reagan.

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*How I wish
I could eat the grass;
merrily gnaw on tree bark
or hay-stalks shattered in the wind.
Then I could be naked
in the rain;
swim like a duck, uncaring;
feel like a tree, awake, unmoving,
aware of everything, yet indifferent
to the end of life
or the loss of a few leaves
beneath the winter chill.*

Wilson and I sat at a table in the back corner. About three dozen people were packed into the coffee shop, many listening intently to the poet who was reading. He spoke clearly, staring at his shoes. I got the impression he was being compelled to read, likely by a friend, or the girl in the front with the loving eyes.

*thunder scatters my thoughts
a raindrop
a concept of God
the black side of my eyelids*

Wilson sipped his coffee and seemed intrigued, like a child at the zoo for the first time. Looking around to see if I knew anyone, I was disappointed. A few familiar faces; those regulars I always saw when I drifted through events like these: people for whom it actually meant something. They were no different than people who played sports or went dancing. Some people have or do things by which they define themselves. For Wilson it was the FBI. For some of the people in the crowd it was poetry.

*"Mister, lend me a coin,
I need a smoke."
Cough. Cough.
There are three beetles on the tree
trying to eat an ant that hasn't died yet.
How did I ever arrive here?
The beggar holds his hand out.
It has a crack in it.
"Yougointotestor?"
I blink.
"Bumeasmoke?"
I walk past the store.
There is a blade of grass in the sidewalk.
I would like to offer it to him.
I wonder what he would say.
I wonder if he ever wished to be a tree.*

The poet bowed. There was polite applause. Half the crowd seemed nervous in anticipation of their own few moments on the obscure stage. It is for these people I came to readings; to glean from them another piece of humanity.

Wilson nudged me on the elbow and motioned to the entrance of the coffee shop. Karl and Clara had just walked in and were scanning the crowd for acquaintances. Seeing me they began to weave through the tables toward us. I shared a look with Wilson. I couldn't tell if he was uncomfortable or excited.

"Karl, Clara," I said as they sat down, "it's been awhile. How've you been? This is Tom." They exchanged pleasantries. "So what have you been up to Karl? I haven't seen you around for awhile."

"Nothing much really."

"Weren't you out of town?" He looked at Clara before answering. The glance was brief but obvious enough.

"Yes, up at Roderick's cabin."

"Did you go too?" I asked Clara.

"Yes."

"Yeah, I wish I'd gone. Roderick asked, but I had some things to take care of. I always like it up there."

"I didn't know you'd been."

"A couple of times, just for short visits. How long were you there?"

"A week."

"It must have been nice. I could use a break."

"From what?" She mocked. "You don't work."

"And you hate me for it. Did you see any deer?" She shook her head negatively. "That's too bad. The last time I was there..." The next poet was being introduced. She was a middle aged lady from Langley. She read; something about a honeysuckle and a virgin. I didn't pay attention.

"That was nice." Karl said when the applause subsided.

"It was meaningless." Clara replied scornfully.

"I liked it." Wilson said. "But I don't know much about poetry."

"It was too flowery, like a greeting card. Definitely not art." Clara spoke authoritatively, as if her opinion was fact.

"Whether it is art, I don't know, but I still liked it." Wilson said meekly.

"Me too." Karl added. Alone he would have converted to Clara's opinion. She tended to dominate him. She answered by means of a condescending half smile.

"Do you know poetry well?" Wilson asked.

"Better than the two of you."

"I don't doubt that, as for myself at least. As I said, I know very little, but that doesn't answer the question of whether you know a lot about it. Did you study it in college?"

"I've never been to college."

"Do you write?"

"No."

"Then what gives you the right to judge that woman's poetry, beyond whether or not you personally like it?"

"I know art." She snapped at him.

"How?"

"I just do." The conversation ended as the next poet took stage. Clara turned her back to us so she could watch. The grin I had been holding back slipped from my mouth, and I caught Wilson's eye. He did not return the smile. He had been honestly trying to understand her. It made me feel immoral. I would have asked her questions like that just to get under her skin. At the end of the poem Clara left the table to mingle with some other acquaintances.

"Did I upset her?" Wilson asked.

"She's always like that." Karl answered. "She thinks she knows everything."

"What does she do for a living?"

"She's an artist."

"Really? What's she do?"

"Paintings, sculptures; what's it called?" He asked me.

"Utilitarianism. Clara's a socialist; a big fan of art with a purpose, like the Russian artists of the twenties. Mostly, though, she works odd jobs; factories generally. I think she likes to be oppressed when she works."

"She's sold a few pieces." Karl added.

"Socialist huh?" Wilson asked innocently. "What's that mean?"

"Karl?" I deflected.

"That the workers are oppressed by the capitalist system and that we should all have an equal share of things."

"Isn't that communism?"

"It's not the same."

"How."

"I really can't say." Karl hung his head slightly. "Clara could explain better."

"You're socialist too?"

"Yes."

"I don't know I've ever met one before. What's it mean to be a socialist in America?" Karl was uncomfortable and stammered some twenty seconds before for being saved by the introduction of the next

poet. Clara returned to our table. At the end of the performance, Karl excused himself.

"So Karl told me you are an artist." Wilson informed Clara when he had gone. "And a socialist."

"Did he?"

"Yes."

"Okay. What's it to you?"

"You don't like me do you?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, I can tell. It's okay. Not everyone has to like everyone else."

"That's true."

"Okay." He looked at his watch. "I should be going anyway."

"You sure? The show's not over yet." I interjected.

"Yeah, I've got some things to do, but thanks for inviting me. I enjoyed it."

"See you Wilson."

"Goodnight. It was nice to meet you Clara." He shook my offered hand and left. Clara did not respond to him. She was sitting with her arms crossed, a stern look on her face.

"Why did you bring him here?" She asked when he was gone.

"I didn't know you guys would be here." Her face softened. She looked at me oddly.

"Thanks for the warning."

"It was the least I could do."

"Is he gone?" Karl asked as he rejoined us.

"Yes."

"Good." He sighed heavily and threw a scrap of paper on the table. It had two words written on it, in my handwriting: *Tom FBI*. Clara grabbed it and crumpled it in her hand.

It was nearly dusk when I left the coffee shop—the hour of beautiful calm, where shadows frame the world in a pleasant light and birds dance playfully through the sky—a prelude to sunset—a beckoning to the stars. My favorite time of day, but it was broken by the screeching of tires, the honking of horns. Then out of the shadows of the skyscrapers, a white horse, free, dodging and being dodged by

cars and their startled drivers. Its mane fluttered defiantly from its neck. Its eyes glowed with spontaneity; with joy. It was alive—so alive it made the rest of us seem to be pretending; to be playing make-believe like we were living beings. It passed an intersection. The sunlight shone golden on its snow-white coat. It glistened like an angel—like an emissary of some higher power—a sign—an oracle—the screech of tires. A thud. The horse did not make a sound. Beneath the bus the street was red.

Part Three

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Some day, I told myself, some day I will look back and remember this day in a different light. Suffering is only temporary. Hunger cannot last eternally – either you eat or you die. Still, dying bit by bit, your body gnawing away first on fat, then on muscle; there are certainly less agonizing ways to go.

It had been two days since I fell asleep between the boulders. I had wandered westward the best I could. There was no reason to it, to go west; that was simply the direction I started out. Eventually I'd have to reach somewhere or die. At least there was water; random, muddy, pools left over from the rainstorm. It was wretched to drink. My stomach ached inside and out, and I staggered a lot. My forehead was feverish. The wound on my stomach was infected. It oozed. I wonder if it was only two days. Maybe it was three. Maybe I was heading east. Or in a circle. It was hard to tell. All the ground looked the same and the mountains did not seem to move. Maybe I wasn't even walking. It was hard to tell. I couldn't keep my eyes open very long, and I kept seeing things. I swear I saw Danny Akers standing on a boulder. Danny Akers, who I last saw in the fifth grade before he moved to Salem. Danny Akers. What the hell brought him to mind? He was laughing. He held a firefly. When I opened my eyes he was gone. In the distance a white horse was neighing. It reared back on its hind legs and tried to fly. When I closed my eyes it vanished. I stumbled. It felt good to lie down. Something crawled over my arm. It had many legs. I did not mind. The sun reproached me. My hunger convulsed. Danny Akers. Shouldn't he have grown up? Or maybe I was still ten years old. It felt the same as when I had strep throat and felt like I was spinning all the time. Spinning and falling. Maybe I was still ten years old, lying in my childhood bed with Colonel, the foxhound, curled at my feet. Maybe all the years between had been some kind of mystifying dream; a mirage. I opened my eyes. The sun smiled. I tried to open them again – to see when I was ten. Something crawled around my shin. It had no legs. I did not mind.

The day before, when I could still walk a fair bit, I was happy. After being locked up for so long it felt good to stroll through the mountains and watch the passing clouds. I forgot about the war; that many of the people I might meet would lock me back up or even kill me. That all seemed distant. I came upon the ruins of a clay hut. Childlike, I explored. I found an old metal plate. It had been painted red. I tried to imagine the hands that ate from it. I tried to imagine the hands that made it. The hands that mined the ore. The hands that painted, transported and ladled things onto it. How many people touched this rusty old plate in some way – in what time – for what purpose? On the back “Made in England” was engraved. I threw it in the sand. An old song passed through my mind. It played loudly. Then I began to think and it was gone.

“A man could find God here.” I thought and sat down as if to wait. A small bush at my feet had thorns on it, and I plucked one off. I took my boots off and let my feet breathe. It was pleasant. Glancing around the empty horizon I suddenly smiled. It reminded me of camping as a teenager, when we would pick a peak at random and climb to it. At the top the world always seemed like it was ours. That was with Owen and Reagan. We would have lunch and tell each other our dreams before running down the mountainside like deer. That was where Reagan and I first kissed; on some nameless Cascade peak, while, tired, Owen rested a few hundred yards below. That was the end of things for the three of us. Owen drifted away. It’s odd how people can be so close for a time – a year, a summer, a childhood – and then they are strangers again; one of the billions traveling through life without intersecting your path; one of the billions that might die without your notice; a nameless being who for all intents and purposes does not exist in your perception of this life, except in the things their hands have touched that your hands also touch or in the common air you breathe or places you stand, separated only by time. I put my boots back on and started walking.

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When I collapsed for the last time I thought I was going to die. I was sure of it. But strangely, I did not care. Something happened to me out there, wandering around the Afghan hills half blind, my stomach numb, my bones dry. I accepted death. I gained faith, not in any god or baptism but in life. I felt it. I felt alive like never before. Yes, this life was draining out moment by moment, but isn't that always true? Of course it is, I realized, but more so I realized that life would not die with my death. In some way it would go on. And that comforted me. Whatever it is, this life, I was part of it. I would forever be part of it. In a thousand years, when all record of who I am will be irretrievably destroyed, I still will have existed. It's like a footstep in the sand. The waves will erase it as if it never existed, but it did. It may not sound reassuring, but I felt it: my existence. It comforted me.

I lay in the darkness of my mind, exhausted, exhilarated. Pain from time to time would shoot through my limbs or tear at my stomach with rabid finality, but for the most part I was empty. It was as if my body was gradually ceasing to exist, leaving only my mind and my internal sense of feeling. My senses flowed. I have no better way to describe it. I felt like the wind, like I was ready to be set free, except I was held back, linked to the quelling remnants of my brain. Everything was dark, but it felt light. No memory. No dream. There was only present – an overwhelming sense of being. Even the pain was beautiful. I was ready to die. Perhaps I was already dead. But no, I felt the chill moisture of water streaming down my throat. A prick on my arm and the indelible spread of an IV drip tingling in my veins. After a time I realized I was in a helicopter. Awhile later I opened my eyes to a hospital room. A nurse was standing by the door.

"How are you feeling?" She asked kindly when she realized I was awake.

"Hungry." I croaked. My lips were burnt. I felt terrible. Dying was much more pleasant than coming back to life. She smiled and left the room. I shifted a little and felt a sharp pain in my stomach. Weakly I pushed down the blankets and lifted my shirt. A bandage was wrapped around my torso.

"Careful." The nurse said, returning with a tray of food: applesauce, yogurt and juice. "You'll tear your stitches out."

"Stitches?" I remembered the scrape on my stomach.

"Fifteen of them." She helped me sit up fully, adjusting the tubes attached to my arm. "Your stomach was infected pretty bad when they brought you in yesterday. We had to cut out the worst of it. If it hurts too much, let me know. We can give you a little more morphine."

"It's okay for now." I lifted the glass of juice to my lips. It felt like it weighed a dozen pounds.

Those days drift away. There were people there; visitors, debriefers, officers. If they did not speak I did not notice them. They were like ghosts; memories lingering, tying me to a self I was no longer party to. It did not seem real. I was still there; in the blackness of my feeling mind, separated from the physicality of myself. I saw these people, comprehended, answered them, but I was not like them.

I convalesced. I was empty. I did not try to explain. I...I...I. It cannot be told without this moniker of self, yet at the moment the term was inconsequential. Who I had always seemed to be was thrust aside. I did not want to kill myself—I wanted to live as it was impossible to live; to be free from all societal restrictions; to be a beast; a bird without possession beyond my own skin; where the only concern was life – no things, only beings.

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In short, I lost all taste for the military; for lowering myself before rank; for pretending patriotism; for pretending any individual was my enemy. It did not sit well with those whom held power over me. They attributed it to my illness or my captivity, I am sure, but it was neither. I had always felt it. But it took the darkness of the desert night to allow me time to think – to be alone – and to realize I could no longer take part in such things as I found morally contradictory to my own view of life. It may change in time. I may someday be old and regret that I ever believed in humanity. I may then wage war, be patriotic and wave the flag of separation that is the nation-state. But not now. Not then.

I was cast into prison. Locked behind those bars I watched the world pass. The sun rose, set, the wind tossed the trees and I was motionless. How many miles did I pace across that stone floor? How many dreams died there? My old life faded. Friends vanished from my thoughts. Life was unreal.

There were faces there too, passing through my waking dream. Men of all sorts; all colors, creeds, dispositions. They remain somewhere in my memory. I suppose, if I wished, I might draw them out, describe them to the last detail and tell anecdotes of them. I do not wish to. They were meaningless. Our lives crossed, but this intersection did not affect us. Though I remember tears when I parted (not in my eyes). How could I have come to mean something to them? It is no matter. It is no different than when we cry for those who die. The dead do not care. They have gone on.

-30-

It was by pure chance, I suppose, I ran into Owen again. I had been out of prison only a few days and was in San Francisco figuring out what to do with my life. On a whim I spent a day walking around Berkeley, up and down Telegraph and Bancroft, observing the odd creatures which assembled in the shops and on the streets. They cheered me, these people, though I knew most in time would cast off their shabby defiance of all systems and integrate from necessity. Most, not all. There were still a few crawling about from the old days, when they fought for things in the sixties and thought they might change the world. Poor sight, the old beggars. But I did not know, I reasoned, the merit, joy or lack thereof of these individuals. I did not know if their lives, so much of which seemed spent playing the same few tunes on a guitar, were any worse or better than any other life anyone else had lived. So I left them there and climbed the hills of the campus, strolling down the manicured lawns and paths, past students laying idly in the sun or tossing Frisbees back and forth; past the library and on to the clock tower which for so long had stood overlooking all. At the top I stared at San Francisco. The skyscrapers were like toys. The red bridge hid behind a cloud. Beyond, unseen, the emptiness of the ocean. Someone nestled by my side, looking likewise afar. We glanced at each other, glanced again and turned in deep surprise.

"I'll be damned." Owen said first. "Is that really you?" We shook hands heartily. He seemed drawn into his own thoughts. "It makes sense then." He said.

"What?" I asked unknowing. He had aged, but he was still the same. A comfort lingered between us, more of the years when we were growing up than of the later times.

"It makes sense, us meeting here."

"How's that? Say, why are you here? I thought you moved to Denver."

"I did. I've been here a couple years though. I heard you were in the army."

"I was."

"But not anymore."

"No."

"Good." Silence. "It makes perfect sense, doesn't it?"

"How should I know?"

"I wasn't talking to you." I looked around.

"We're alone." I said cautiously, not wanting to point out that if he wasn't talking to me, he assuredly was talking to himself.

"Are you sure?" He looked at me intently.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Not what, whom." I raised my eyebrows at him, not understanding. "The reader." He said.

"The reader?"

"Yes. I was not talking to you but to the reader."

"The reader of what?"

"This story. Our story. We're not real, you know."

"How's that?"

"We don't exist. We're figments of an author's mind. We should not delude ourselves to pretend we are real beings."

"Are you mad? I see plain enough that you are real."

"You think you do, but you don't"

"And you know this how?"

"Think about it. Why are you always narrating things?"

"I don't..."

"No? 'I raised my eyebrows at him, not understanding.' You said that a minute ago."

"I did not."

"Not to me, to the reader."

"I... I. If that's true, how do you know?"

"I don't know."

"And our words now? Is someone else writing them?"

"I don't know." He crossed his arms and put his hand to his chin. He leaned against the wall. Behind him the bay was blue. "See, you've done it just now, haven't you; told the reader something? It was too long of a pause. You have to have said something."

"I did nothing of the kind."

"I should like to speak to him, or her."

"If, by some unlikely chance you are correct about this, which, again, I cannot fathom, then everything you say will be read by the reader."

"Yes? But no, have we no life outside of the story? We could sit here and talk for hours. There's no way all our words could be written."

"But we haven't been here for hours."

"No."

"So try."

"What?"

"Speaking to this reader of yours. What would you like to say?"

"I have a question actually."

"Yes?"

"Are you happy?"

"Well? Did they answer?"

"How could they?"

"That's true. If the story's not done, they can't have read this yet and thus cannot answer. And if the story is done and they're reading it, then they cannot answer us. So what was the point?"

"I don't know, but it felt right to ask."

"But if this is a story, you didn't ask. The author did."

"No, I think I did."

"So you're part of the story but you can act independently?"

"Yes, no, I don't know. It's not an easy thing to understand."

"I'll agree with you there. What ever put it in your mind anyway?"

"It's just, well I feel as if I've just been born. As if, well, until you remembered me that I didn't exist."

"But don't you remember your life?"

"Yes, I think I do, but it is vague. It could be false."

"Don't you remember when we met?"

"In sixth grade?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure that actually happened."

"How else did we know each other?"

"Because we are supposed to."

"But you remember anyway, right, and I remember, so it must have been real."

"How's Reagan?" He asked suddenly.

"I haven't seen her for years."

"Have you thought of her lately?"

"Yes, and you as well."

"Thank you. It keeps you alive, you know, having people think about you."

"I wasn't aware."

"What else would it be?"

"I don't know, food, oxygen, thought. A lack of death." He stared at me a few moments and then smiled.

"How've you been all these years?"

"Wait; just like that you're dropping it, aren't you?"

"What?"

"This thing about the reader, about why we're alive."

"I've decided it's not worth thinking about."

"How's that?"

"We can't change it. I mean, it either is or isn't. Either way it doesn't affect how we live, right? So yes, I'm dropping it. How have you been?"

We were up late that night, reminiscing, filling in the blanks of our lives. He lived in a dirty little apartment off Bancroft, to which we retired with a bottle of rum and a six pack of Coke.

"Remember the first time we got drunk?" He asked as we settled in.

"Of course. I thought I was going to die."

"You were pretty sick. How old were we then? Sixteen?" I nodded. "It seems like ages ago."

"It was." We were silent until our drinks emptied.

"So what now? What are you going to do with yourself?"

"I haven't quite decided."

"If you need money, I might be able to hook you up with something."

"Such as?"

"That depends on what you're comfortable with."

"Selling again?"

"Among other things."

"Still smoke?"

"Here and there. Nothing more though, not for awhile." I considered him. He was a different person then, when he shot heroin and sold weed. That was when we fell out of touch – after he stole Reagan's car. "I make most of my money making fake IDs for college students."

"Make?"

"Yes. It's not hard. All it took was a small investment for a card printer. I made the money back in no time."

"A little dangerous isn't it? Someone gets caught, it's bound to come back to you."

"It's a risk, but not so much as you'd think. No one knows who I am. A hint of the police, and I'm gone."

"You could make a lot more money, you know, knowing how to do that."

"I'm always open to suggestions."

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I stood motionless for quite some time after the horse died. I was not alone in that, though most pedestrians shook it off and continued with their business. The bus driver was distraught. She came out after a few moments on the radio and held her hands over her face. A police officer arrived on a bicycle. Another arrived on a horse. This beast sniffed its counterpart and seemed sad. The man that rode it had a tear in his eye.

"A bloody mess, eh?" A man said, pausing next to me. "Did you see it – smack!" He slammed his left fist into his open right hand. "Just like that." He laughed. It was an empty laugh. I think he rather enjoyed the sight. "Crazy ain't it? I've never seen so much blood."

"I have." I said sedately, thinking of a cave in Afghanistan, of Abdullah slumped against the wall, of Sergeant Caplin leaning against the Humvee. The man eyed me wildly and stepped away a bit. The passengers were filing off the bus. I turned my steps toward home, walking trance-like, a shuddering reflection of the impact surging through my body. I closed my eyes and felt as if I was the horse, running, free, breathing the fresh air, then, thud. My body convulsed with empathetic pain. It is like a rush of adrenalin, imaging death.

When I got home Reagan was sitting on the couch. Her legs were tucked beneath her, and she had a glass of water in her hand. It

was full. She smiled at me. I sat beside her. My face must have shown my distress because she asked if I was okay.

"A horse got hit by a bus." I said vacantly. Then, turning to her, "How are you?"

"Fine. Where did...?"

"Just up the street."

"Is it okay?"

"Dead."

"Oh." There was remorse in this utterance. It is amazing how such a small sound can express so many emotions.

"I think it was happy, though, beforehand."

"That's good."

"Anyway." I turned to her. Something had changed in her eyes. What I am not sure. It may have been nothing more than the light.

"Anyway." She repeated slowly. My attention was drawn to her lips. I remembered kissing them, years ago. I remembered holding her naked body in my arms, tracing her backbone with my fingertip. Maybe it was because she was the first, but I never enjoyed a lover so much as I did her. Sitting there, watching her lips, I wondered if my life had been a mistake; if maybe I would have enjoyed it more with her. Probably.

"I'm sorry." I said suddenly.

"For what?"

"For leaving."

"That was a long time ago." She understood. We had not spoken of it since I returned to Seattle, but it had lingered. I reached out and touched her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned against it. Her warmth in my hand was soft, relieved. She sighed, opened her eyes and leaned against me, nestling her arm around my waist. I smelled her hair, and it was the same as it had always been. I kissed the top of her head, and we were silent for awhile, holding each other, embracing the closeness. I thought of our parting; the last moments before I set out on the long road to Santa Fe for college. God knows why I decided to go there; to leave behind everyone I had known and loved. I wept the last time I held her in my arms, but I never considered turning back. Holding her now I want to tell myself to stay, to give up the cast of independence; that it is better to love and be loved than to have any great pride or achievement in the world. But I would not have listened. She told me similar things at the time, but I

did not listen. I wanted my own path. Well, I traveled down that path, and by good fortune, it returned me to her arms.

“So tell me,” she said a few hours later, after we had reacquainted ourselves with lust and postured animal-esque in what shall surely be one of the most passionate evenings of my life, “where you and Owen got your money. I assume it was together.”

“Yes.” I answered. We were naked beneath the sheets, and her legs were smooth against my own. Her head was against my chest, and I was happy.

I told her how Owen and I ran into each other in Berkeley and how together we hatched a scheme to set ourselves free from the burden of work. “It was a fairly simply scam really; check fraud and identity theft. We’d find a target company, get hold of their payroll account, then someone’s driver’s license and social security numbers to produce fake documents. After that we’d make, oh, say thirty paychecks, all five-six hundred dollars, sometimes more, and cash them at different banks. End of the day we would walk away with fifteen–twenty grand. Sometimes as much as fifty. In about a year and a half we made over three million dollars. We split it, and that’s when I came back here.”

“I don’t know that I like that.” She said after a moment. “I think I’m okay with the stealing.” She paused. “I just don’t like the idea of identity theft. It happened to my mom a couple of years ago. It stressed her out pretty good. I don’t like the idea that you made other people go through that.”

“Neither do I. Nor did I then.”

“But you did it anyway.”

“Yes, but we were as selective as possible with the companies we stole from and individuals we impersonated. We did a lot of telemarketing companies, some tobacco companies, a bank, a jeweler, Wal-Mart, places like that. I suppose, in the end, the banks probably covered most of it, or insurance companies – we did a couple of those too. As for individuals, as much as possible we used criminals, sex offenders, strip club owners; you get the idea. We tried to only use those that use others.”

“In your judgment.”

“Yes. It’s not perfect, I admit, but morally, at the time, I had no objections.”

“And now?”

"I feel bad," I said after thinking for a moment, "if our actions caused anyone grief."

"Of course they did."

"Some, yes, but I would guess, in most cases, it was a mere inconvenience; a hassle of paperwork, changing bank accounts, things like that. Look, I can't say whether what I've done is right or wrong. I think it's wrong to steal from an individual, yet, I don't know; so much is stolen from individuals by corporations and by each other through sheer profitism and deception, I don't feel what I did contributed any more to the perfidy of the world than say three dollar ATM fees, eight percent interest or houses that cost eight times an average workers gross yearly wage, forcing them into inalterable debt to afford a decent home."

"This is not about what others do but about what you have done." I was silent. She said it so simply, without judgment, it made me feel naïve. I almost told her we had given nearly a million dollars to charity, to buy clothes for children and dig wells in Africa. I had promised myself beforehand that I would not. Doing so would sound like justification. We took the money for ourselves. Giving part of it away was an afterthought; our way of redistributing wealth. I did not tell her. She sat up in bed, moving away from me, thinking. "I don't know." She said at last. "There are worse things you might have done."

"Better too."

"Yes, but I'm okay with this." She looked at me. "Maybe it's selfish, but I want to live." The last words held a sense of yearning. She leaned close against me.

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They arrested Karl the next day. I found out later they had video of his face shortly before the attack of a lobbying firm, from a gas station I believe. Wilson told me himself, calling under the pretext of asking whether I had any new information, then dropping the news at the end of our conversation.

"By the way," he said, "we arrested your friend Karl." I still hadn't figured Wilson. There seemed no reason to tell me this. "Things will start to fall now. What did they ever hope to accomplish?"

A guy gets a little money and suddenly he thinks he can change the world.”

“What?”

“Roderick. Didn’t you know? He’s the one funding the whole thing. You told me yourself he’s the ringleader.” It all made sense. God, I should have thought of it weeks ago, when he told me he knew who Roderick was. When I got off the phone with Wilson, I called Roderick.

“Hey Roderick is Clarabelle around?”

“No.”

“I’ll try her cell then. Later.”

“Bye.”

He would meet me that night. I felt a bit of a rush. I never expected to play these games with the FBI listening in, but it was no matter. Only he and I knew what the word Clarabelle meant – what time and place.

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These old precautions stir in my mind. Brevity codes. Dead drops. Following and being followed. We had planned it all out, just in case, but never did I believe – well I must have expected it at some level.

I left the condo at two that afternoon, hopping on the first bus to pass and riding south to the stadiums, where I caught another bus to Capitol Hill. A third bus brought me back downtown, where I caught a taxi. A couple short stops and half an hour later I was in the University District. I walked through the campus, pausing to eat lunch in the middle of Red Square. I chuckled to myself and felt like a child playing spy games with an imaginary friend. It all seemed fabulous. Yet my caution did not seem unjust. This was, after all, my life. I shuddered at the thought of barred windows, remembering the endless days pacing in my cell. I think back. Could they have proof? Certainly not to the ridiculous PUF. No, it had to be in the days with Owen. But how? Maybe I was being paranoid. Maybe Wilson was simply being friendly. I could not take the chance.

After lunch I walked around the campus for awhile, crossing my path and backtracking at random, mixing amongst the passing crowds of students. At last I ventured off campus, down University

Ave and caught the bus to Lynnwood. Once there I took a circuitous route to a storage center and, quite certain I was not followed, made my way to the unit I had rented under a false name. Inside I changed my clothes and emptied the contents of a gallon jug into the gas tank of a 150cc motorcycle. Donning a black helmet, I rolled the machine into the sun, locked the unit and was off. I headed north on I-5 for a few miles, exited and returned south to take I-405 south. I felt safe now. Still, I exited the freeway and spent an hour driving through various subdivisions and rural roads before returning to 405 in Kirkland. I headed east on I-90 and soon distanced myself from all but the furthest remnants of metropolitan sprawl.

Turning off on an unnamed forest service road, I rode slowly for about two miles before turning into a dead end and shutting the motor off. I walked into the woods and waited until dusk. No other vehicles had ventured down the road. I started the bike and headed into the mountains. After a few miles I came to a cross in the road and paused. After listening for a moment I turned left. A mile and a half later I slowed to a crawl and scanned the brush on the side of the road. I stopped, crept forward a little and backed the bike into a small opening in the bushes. When I stepped into the road and looked back I could scarcely see it myself. I carefully swept the footprints and tire tracks from the side of the road and backtracked a few hundred yards on foot. There was a slight tire line in the gravel, but I could not help that. I leapt from the road onto a large stone beyond a ditch. From there to another stone, and then another. I stopped, cocked my head to listen. It sounded like the faint sound of a motorcycle, but I wasn't sure. The sound of flowing water deafened me as I drew near the river. At the shore I paused, watching the white waters crash amongst rocks. It was not a great rapid but strong enough to knock a man from his feet if he was fool enough to walk across. Except for one small avenue, which I knew well. I took my pants off and put them in my backpack. I held my shoes in my hands and plunged knee deep into the selected spot. The chill water nettled my legs, and the endless current surged against me. I leaned in correction and adjusted my feet on the slimy stones beneath. I fancied a fish nibbled on my toe, but I knew it was not true.

Some minutes later I stood on the far side, my legs shivering wet below the thighs as I replaced my pants, shoes and socks. I took a flask from my pocket and had a sip of brandy. I followed this with a granola bar and moved from the shore, concealing myself in a hollow

of rocks and short trees. I was in the center of an island. To the far side from where I had crossed I heard a motorcycle's engine, clearly now, even against the river's might. It turned off and all was silent save the reassuring sounds of nature. I took the 9mm from my backpack and slipped a loaded clip inside. I gripped the weapon warmly, my fingers recalling its metallic touch – the snap of its discharge – the many hours at the firing range attempting to perfect my control of death. A splash in the river, like a footstep. A curse. A man's body moving toward the island; a shadow mostly, except for bits illuminated by the quarter moon; a forearm, a shoulder blade. He moves slow, feeling with his feet against the rush. I take aim with the pistol; trace the shadow with the sight. He is across, dressing, moving into the trees. He calls out quietly, a whisper really. He says my name. I lower the sight from his shadow head and place the sidearm on my lap. I feel as if I have been paranoid again.

"Here." I answer, and he creeps toward me. We shake hands. "Any problems?"

"None. I did everything you said. I'll be damned if anyone could follow me through all that."

"It's the FBI Roderick." Even in the dark I could feel him wince.

"Roderick's dead, as of today."

"Good, so who are you now – wait, I don't want to know."

"Well, for tonight at least, I'll be Owen again. How about that?"

"It's been awhile, hasn't it Owen?"

"Yes. I suppose I'll never really be me again, except with you."

"It's just a name."

"Easy for you to say. You still have yours."

"Not after today." We were silent for a moment. "What about Clara?" I asked.

"The police took her for questioning."

"Lot of good it will do them." Owen did not speak. "You okay just walking away from her?"

"Yes." He said weakly. Then more firmly. "I always knew it was a possibility." In the moonlight I could see his eyes. They were reflective. "And you?"

"What?"

"Reagan."

"She's going with me."

"She knows?"

"Nearly everything."

"It'll never be the same again, will it, between me and her?"

"I doubt it. You hurt her you know, with the car, and what you did to Sarah."

"That was ages ago."

"Some things never fade."

"Well, we have our memories, my friend. You ever wish to be young again, to laugh so free and easy?"

"Of course, but more of laughing that way again." Silence clung to us. The moon passed behind a cloud, and we were in a shadow.

"Shall we?" He asked.

"Yes."

Near the center of the island we hunched in labor to remove a tumble of rocks. This done we struggled to move an unusually rectangular stone. It was a lid. It covered a concrete cell inside of which lay a large waterproof case. We drew it onto the stones. Owen removed a key from his pocket and opened it. Inside was a smaller waterproof case. It opened with a key from my pocket. Inside was a briefcase. Opening this we removed two parcels, one marked with X, the other with O. The X was mine. I slid it into my backpack. Owen stowed O into his own.

"Tell me again," Owen said lightly, "why this was better than a safe-deposit box."

"Precaution."

"Fair enough."

"And the PUF?"

"It will survive, in me if in nothing else. The battle has just begun."

"Can't you see," I said, shaking my head, "it will never amount to anything, these attacks, the pamphlets."

"Perhaps, but I have to do something. Otherwise I risk losing faith in the ideal, or worse yet falling into the sad state of wishing suddenly for the world to change – for everyone to "wake up" one day. No, it may not be the best way, but I must at least try to live by my beliefs."

"Even if it means living in the shadows the rest of your life?"

"Yes."

"A word of advice then."

"Of course."

"No more bombs. Eventually you'll hurt someone, besides they scare people."

There was a flash of light on the road, on Owen's bank. We grew hushed and crept low into the shadows as the lights vanished and reappeared with curves and hills in the road. My index finger played with the safety of the 9mm.

"Damn it, I was careful." Owen whispered. His breath was cloud of vapor. The headlights drew near. They shone directly at us. I felt the beams hovering overhead, searching. I swear I could hear Owen's heartbeat, faintly over the pounding of my own. Then it passed, drove on, gradually vanishing from sight. A coincidence?

"You know," says Owen when the lights have gone, after we have lain awhile yet in silence, "it reminds me; do you remember what we talked about when we first met in Berkeley?"

"We talked of many things."

"Yes, but the very first thing. Surely you remember."

"Yes – your metaphor about our lives being some part of a story; about someone reading our words."

"Metaphor?"

"For God."

"Hmmm. I never meant it to be. Anyway, the reason I mention it is that I know what's going to happen."

"In the story?"

"Yes."

"Which is also our lives?"

"Yes."

"So you can foretell the future?"

"No. It's more – well, you know how if you're reading a book for the second time you already know what's going to happen but it still keeps your attention and surprises you?"

"Yes."

"It's like that."

"So what will happen then?"

"When I leave you I will cross the river back to my bike, but before I reach it I will be arrested. They are there now, no doubt, waiting, cautiously trying to find me, not sure if I am alone or with someone else. No matter, they will arrest me and I will spend a good portion of my life in prison because I have stood up for my beliefs."

"Not to mention the theft and bombings."

"Yes, those are the actions which will imprison me, but they are residuals of my beliefs. It is not a matter of right and wrong, only of what is socially acceptable. What I have done for my beliefs is miniscule compared to what those in power have done, yet that is the key – they have power; power to corrupt, to override human dignity, to create inequality, wage wars and suppress dissidents. They have power. I do not. Thus, as I am an inconvenience to the society they have constructed, I shall be removed."

"Who is 'they'?"

"That's the problem, isn't it? 'They' are us. 'They' are no one, everyone; all those people just living their lives the only way they know how, never wondering if it is right to do such and such or wrong to do such and such or how any action affects the overall balance of human life. 'They' is meaningless; a disassociation; an attempt to create an unified enemy where there is none, only human perception built on the pillars of historical human perception.

"I would argue that this perception is lacking; that it leaves too many to suffer, not out of necessity but out of a manufactured inequality." A chill wind ran through the trees. I thought I heard a footstep in the woods. "It is time for me to go." He said with finality. "They're waiting."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me, the other way."

"No, I must know. It is not enough to believe." In the moonlight I caught his eye. We shook hands warmly. "You will never speak to me again." He said thoughtfully.

He placed his hand on my shoulder, stood and strode into the dark.

"Goodbye." I whispered. He was gone.

Owen's Interlude

Sorry for the intrusion, but there are things my nameless friend, God bless him, does not know. He is egocentric – let's call him Fred, as he has refrained from giving his name anywhere in this story and thus I, like you, am at a loss as to what to call him. I like people to have a name, it makes them more real. So I'll go with Fred, although it's a plain name. Perhaps something more exotic would be better, like Balthazar or Maximilian or Gerard. But I'm partial to Fred. It's the kind of name you give an imaginary friend or a dog. So Fred – by the way my name is Owen. For awhile there I was Roderick, but Owen was my given name, after a great uncle on my mother's side that I never met. I saw a picture of him once though. It kind of freaked me out. He looked like an undertaker. But as I was saying, Fred is egocentric. If something doesn't involve him, he will never take time to explain. You will see if you read the rest of this book – always lost in his own world. So I thought I'd fill you with what happened to the rest of us.

Karl was good to his word and didn't say a peep; though I am sure he could have cut a nice deal if he had. In the end he was sentenced to six years in prison. A long time, yes, but he will make it. From the beginning I knew he would be a good soldier. It was in the way he carried himself. He simply never had a cause to fight for before I came along and told him the truth. I feel bad, though, imagining him in his cell, cast adrift amongst the criminals of this world; brutes and unfortunates; products of the error that is humanity's legacy to each succeeding generation. I can envision Karl staring from the barred windows at the distant cars on the highway, remembering his days changing oil, considering, probably for the first time, if he truly was oppressed. And in the end I think he will realize that he was, not so overtly as he once thought but subtlety, like most of us have been. And he will think it right to take up the banner of equality and accountability – to try to affect change. Yes, I can see him wading his way through the corridors of imprisonment, fending off the odd fight, reading Mao Tse-tung and Karl Marx; thinking, finally, for himself. I see him in the yard with two other inmates, reasoning with them, converting them to our cause. Then others;

building cells; recruiting believers to the name of equality. Oh, Karl, how you progress my once naïve friend. How I love your simple way; your earnestness which draws them to you; your unbounded zealousness, free from the doubts which have plagued my mind. I praise you for the dozen able men you sent to me, each of whom now carry forth the banner of the PUF to battle. I praise the score of others these twelve have carried with them. We grow strong now, my friend, and I am glad to welcome you back to a life of freedom after these four years. It is almost a pity you did not serve the full six; we might have built an army. But I get ahead of myself.

I will have much to say about Karl later, but for now I will turn to Clara. The FBI tortured her, poor girl, dragging her in for questioning a dozen times, seizing her apartment and rummaging through everything she owned. This went on for months, but they never arrested her. There was never proof. A few pamphlets, things like that, but nothing like with Karl. It wore on her though. She lost a lot of weight. That bastard Wilson would follow her openly; show himself at odd times to keep her on edge, trying to drive her mad so she would confess. She never did though, the darling. It threw them off I think. They thought one of them would crack, either Clara or Karl. It was their only hope to convict me. I'll give Fred credit for that. He may not have cared for my beliefs, but he taught me how to cover my tracks. Without him I surely would have slipped up. Hell, if he had been on board he probably would have thought about the damn gas station camera and made disguises like he did when we used to cash the forged checks. I knew it too, but somehow it got lost and there's a nice picture of Karl buying gas for the Jeep, which, of course, was photographed on several jobs. That and his damn Red Sox stocking cap. He had to be wearing that in the photo, didn't he? Fred would have caught that too. I am sure of it. But in the end, it may have been for the best. The organization is stronger because of his arrest; ready to do great things.

As for myself, I was arrested at the end of the logging road. For awhile, riding down the hill, I thought my premonition had been nothing more than silly paranoia, but then they were there, blocking the road with squad cars in front and quickly behind. There was little I could do. I came to a stop and turned the bike off. I remember wondering what Fred would have done with that pistol of his... I raised my hands and did as they told me. Agent Wilson was there, and when he called me Owen I knew it was over.

Back in Seattle, during my interrogation, he laid the contents of the O parcel on the table. "Landon Simpkins." He said looking through one set of false documents. "Peter Bernhardt." He read from the second set. "And let's see, the motorcycle was purchased by an Edgar Padilla and the storage unit rented in the name of Lester Fairchild." He stared at me and seemed amused. "Then of course there's Roderick Anders. And however many more to get this." He rested his hand on an envelope with a hundred thousand dollars inside. "We haven't reached a full count yet." Honestly, at that moment, I wanted to slug Agent Wilson in the face. He was too smug. I did not speak. At the arraignment I was denied bail; a flight risk they said. Then the strangest thing. The lights went out in the courtroom. I ran for the doors, which spread as the emergency lights flicked on. A canister of teargas rolled through, confusing the officers stationed at the exit. One reached out, grabbed me. We both were crying. A tazer felled him, and I was through the door, closing them behind me, breathing the sweet fresh air of a gas mask as I ran down the hall and into the rain. Beside me; Alexander, in a police uniform, removing his gas mask. We were in a car, taking turns changing clothes and driving. We made it to Westlake Mall and changed cars. There were sirens. We drove north, around the bend to the U District, onto I-5 and off into the unknown. In a bank vault in Bellingham I retrieved \$650,000 in cash, as well as my final set of false documents. We headed east. The next day we stopped at a storage center in Spokane to retrieve my stash of counterfeiting supplies; a printer, various papers and all important numbers. By the time we reached Minneapolis Alexander had a new name. We rented a small place out of town, to the north, a third of the way to Brainerd. We were silent. Alexander filmed chickens at a farm up the road and spent a lot of time going through his catalogue of photographs and films. He never said a word about it either, about giving up his life to free me – not even when I thanked him. "I had to." Was all he said. "I had to." One day he asked for fifty thousand dollars so he could go to France. It was the least I could do. He left one morning when I was in town. No goodbye. I haven't heard from him since.

Part Four

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The morning sunlight filtered through the half open shade, creating thick lines of dark and light on Reagan's skin. She lay beside me, nude, sleeping still like a child. We were in India, on the eastern coast. Our hotel overlooked the Bay of Bengal, and it was beautiful. Never shall I forget the scent of fresh flowers on the breeze or how the local girls would weave them in their hair each morning; how relaxed Reagan seemed. Her skin had browned in the years we had been abroad, and she was happy. I was happy too, more than I thought possible. My mind was clear. Life finally made sense, and it was not the freedom of wealth which brought this feeling, it was her. Just to be near her made me happy; to feel loved; to love – to catch her eye while we talked to strangers – to share a laugh in our eyes – to sit together in warm embrace and watch the sun rise or set or to listen to her read a book out loud or at the theater, her head on my shoulder; her warmth. I began to see life through her eyes; through our eyes. Moment by moment our lives became entwined; alike to so many others, yes, but ours. She stirred in her sleep, nestled against me. I closed my eyes, breathed in deep and savored the sense of touch – the connection between us – the simple joy of closeness, of ease. Yes, we saw many things in those days, met many people, some pleasant, some empty, some rude, but those memories shall always be secondary to the memory of her touch – the scent of her skin – the tickling of her hair on my chest or cheek, and yes, the moments of lust – though more than any moment in the act of sex I remember more clearly the touch of her cheek resting against my own when we sat in silent contemplation of an unknown music, a distant sitar playing while the golden sun melted into the grand reflecting colors of the sea. The sense of touch – its memory is sublime; universal. Let me remember. We would lay like that for hours in the morning, naked, our bodies touching, awakening gradually to each other and to life. It was intense at times, feeling so many places at once, overwhelming the receptors of the skin; to feel at once her toes on my toes, her thighs on my thighs, her breasts against my side and arm draped

across my chest – to feel; yes, to feel each place we touched, every centimeter of our united skin; to know warmth of the most blessed kind and feel the lingering softness of her kiss—life made sense.

She stirred fully now, and as I opened my eyes I found her own.

“Shall we?” She said. I kissed her on the forehead, and we left the bed. In the shower we cleaned each other silently, carefully, lingering until the water began to turn cold. As we toweled off, she stared distantly into her thoughts. I sat beside her and waited, sensing a moment of importance. She looked at me, smiled and looked down a moment.

“I want to have a baby.” She said looking up. I kissed her. She dropped her towel and we stood, embraced. I carried her to the sink and from the cabinet took the bottle of birth control pills.

“Sure?” I asked, removing the lid and holding them over the toilet. She kissed me and reached down my arm to turn the bottle over. The pills dropped into the water.

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I do not envy the female the state of pregnancy; the nauseous nights she lies in pain, her body changing, being retrofitted to bear the offspring of our race. I do not envy one bit the pangs of labor I cannot comprehend – the excruciating moment of divesting one’s self of the inmate of one’s own womb – the sleeplessness, the loss of taste; any of the variants experienced by the finest creatures of our kind. I do not envy this, yet—it is beautiful. We all were there, inside the womb. We all grew beneath the thunderous heartbeat of warmth. We all, wretch and saint alike, fell to life from the same dark place, breathed our first native breath and began to learn bit by bit the ritual that is being human. Revered, no matter how she tends to the rest of life, must the mother be – always for that time spent inside. Revered must the lover be who bears thy child; this blank canvas of life which for so long every decision and indecision you make shall form. The weight of what I hold in my hands crushes me. Her clear blue eyes, opening now – what do they remember of that dark place inside? What does she feel? Does she know my voice, remember me from the many hours I spent whispering to her through the thin wall of Reagan’s form? How she wrinkles as she smiles, gapes profoundly at the open space around

her; adjusting to her eyes, using them for the first time to see—what does she see? What does she know, feel? Can she sense my tears of joy? Does she know that I am happy; that her mother is happy; that at this moment, for us, there is no world but in her – no vast billions of individuals crawling about in their individual interdependent lives – only her? Only her.

We are a family now, though I scarcely know what that means anymore. It is convoluted with so many different people living so many different ways. What is a family, or more to the point, what should it be? But I don't think of these things now. She closes her eyes, sleeps. We are close, the three of us, touching each other, feeling near. Reagan sleeps too, and I watch them. It does not matter, I think, that this moment is universal; that countless others have shared such warmth and been bound forever to each other. It does not matter. This moment is ours. This joy is ours. But I fear it shall be degraded, over time, as she grows up, as the world plays with us and necessity creeps in, tearing us apart, leading us. Where indeed shall we be lead or take ourselves? Can this moment not remain? But then what of her? What of her thoughts, her feelings, her freedom to choose what and whom she seeks in life? We are equals, she and I. I have merely the advantage (if it is such a thing) to have begun this life these thirty one years in advance. Nothing more. We are equals. I hold no power over her, except that which I must use out of necessity. Otherwise I have only the respect I build in the coming years of her life. She is not bound to love me – it is the actions I take that will earn this love. And I promise I shall not, what? What promise can I make beyond I shall try my best to allow her to develop into herself; to answer her questions, to teach and to provide her with a home in which she might flourish as a human being? What promise beyond that can I make? Oh, the future, it sparkles now with hope, with the foreshadow of moments bound in the beauty of discovery. I understand the world less today than any other day – how it functions so resolutely by the hands of business and popular perception; how so many people have lived so much of their lives separated from this bliss; how any individual can feel it within their right to deprive any other the opportunity to feel this; to enslave, indenture or burden, oppress, anyone. I just do not understand. Do people not feel, or do they simply fail to comprehend that everyone else is capable of the same feeling? It is too much. I am beyond trying to figure it out. I believe this is right, this moment, this new life resting at my side,

clutched in the arm of this other life entwined joyously with mine. This is my reality. This moment.

But that's it, isn't it – why wars began, why oppression came to be – for this moment and those like them. It was easier to make such moments on the backs of others (as I have done), to compete and enslave, than to join together to simplify labor in order to free time to fill with such moments. And it progressed, became depraved. Yet the moments remain, arising out of the chaos that is this fabricated society; moments which, as always, we all may feel if we let ourselves; if we use reason to examine what makes us happy, what makes the moments we enjoy so special. It is the closeness, the warmth, of a mother, lover, brother, friend, stranger; the feeling of complete acceptance and lack of judgment – to be at ease.

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Our daughter, Arianne, was born in Paris. We sent photos to the new grandparents and a note on where we had been. I am not ashamed to say it was the first message since we left and would be the last for awhile yet. I am not ashamed, but I understand there must have been times they thought we were dead. Times they wondered after us and yearned to see their children, to be close – to remember the days of their own youth and, now, to hold the offspring of their offspring. I comprehend my parents have no doubt felt these things, perhaps more, but it is not enough to alter the fact that I have been happy living my life these past few years. They created me, I thank them for that, but does that forever place a burden on me to gratify their need for attention or to let them know from time to time that I am alive while I undertake this human life? Will I attempt to place this same burden on my daughter? Will I weep when she is away, when I do not know how she carries on or does things of which I am afraid? Perhaps it would be just if I felt whatever it is they feel; whatever Reagan's parents feel to discover by a photograph in the mail that their daughter, who they have not seen for years, has given birth to their first grandchild. Do we care too little? Do they care too much? I cannot know. I know only that such questions rarely strike upon my mind. I am happy. People seldom like to hear about happiness, but I can only recall what I feel. Yes the world turned with its usual business-like mix of doldrums, joys and sufferings, but we did not care.

We were happy. We would walk through the streets of Paris with our fledgling offspring and watch the leaves fall or listen to the flowing waters of the Seine. We journeyed to the Mediterranean and rented a villa on the sea. How vividly I recall sitting on the veranda with Arianne in my lap, watching great ships pass. She cooed and grasped at things. Inside Reagan tapped away at the piano, refining step by step the art she had so successfully taken up once we were abroad and she had the time. The notes played with my daydreams. Strands of Mozart clung to my mind, intermixed with the wine on my tongue and the sparkling waters, the infant face.

Arianne grew. In those lucid days of ease we scarcely noticed at times, but soon she crawled, stood, walked, talked – did all the things all babies eventually do. She was beautiful. Life was different now, but Reagan and I remained happy. It is so simple, our life, our joy, it has become difficult to explain or to pick out a moment to represent the fluid leisure of our lives. I think of Tolstoy, the way he describes the family life, the dialogue of the home, the warmth of familiarity; I cannot do the same. My recollection is not so detailed. It is a feeling; a pulse of who we were in the corridors of my mind. There are smiles. At odd times tears. A heartbeat, small, lingering against my own – my child lying atop of me, asleep; her dreams being dreamed behind eyelids closed in peace. It is a warm night, but I would ask for nothing else. Reagan is in the doorway, watching us. Her eyes remind me of hope. She is alive, truly. We remain like that a long time, until the sun has set and the room has grown dim, lit only by the gas fire in its place. I doze. Reagan sits on the couch, and I feel her foot against my arm. Unconsciously I hold it, rub her ankle. She has a cup of tea and sips it slowly. The aroma fills the room, and I am aware of nothing else but us – but this moment. Yet there were thousands of moments like this—the infinite present of joy.

Some time later we walked the streets of Paris. I remember the stones; the means in which we existed. The air we breathed. It is forgotten but shall forever be part of me. Like all things.

We stopped to watch a juggler on the street. He wrapped himself in his craft and smiled at us. Arianne waved. She was a year by now, speaking soft words of half syllables. “Look.” She said, pointing up the street at a cluster of leaves caught in a dust devil. She clapped her hands and jumped up and down in excitement. This was new, beautiful. Her eyes were unblemished. She ran forward, through the storm, laughing. She stopped on the far side. There was

a man, smiling, with a camcorder to his eye, filming first the storm then its destruction in her wake. He lowered the camera and looked at me. The face was familiar. Alexander. He was older and wore a full beard, but his eyes were the same; still questioning; still in doubt. He smiled, stepped forward and shook my hand. Recognizing Reagan he glanced at Arianne and seemed happy.

"Had lunch?" He said before anything else. We had not. "Come to my place?" We soon were there; a little studio on rue de ---. The walls were covered with photographs. Some I recognized. Many were from his years in Europe. The one I remember most vividly was of a young Moroccan boy. His arms were wrapped around his shoulders and he smiled, but there was sadness in his grin; a taint in the tussle of his hair, the blankness of his eyes. It struck me. I could not help but compare.

The studio itself was small. A kitchen was partitioned from the living area, where he slept on an old daybed beneath the third story window. It overlooked the street.

"I'm still living off the fifty grand Roderick gave me when I left him in Minneapolis." He told me later. "I sell some pictures. I get along all right." He made us sandwiches. We drank tap water. "It's all I have." He said. He lived like he was poor. "It feels right." He added. "It was wrong what we did before. You told me. I doubt you recall, but you said it did not matter if things are wrong with the world, it does not justify acting against one's morals." A pigeon landed on the window sill. Alexander picked up a camera from the floor and snapped a photo. Arianne crept toward the bird until she was beside it, her head looking out the window. He took another photo before the bird flew away. Arianne laughed. So did Alexander. "She's a darling." He said, and we agreed. A cloud passed and sunlight filled the room. A knock at the door. A young woman soon sat among us, wearing an apron and frills on her sleeves. Alexander loved her, he would tell us later, after she returned to work at the bakery across the street. She laughed when she met us and said her name was Michelle. She spoke English better than we spoke French and gave the very impression of being in love with Alexander.

"He came every morning to the store," she said, relating how they met, "to buy a half loaf of bread. I would watch him and sometimes catch his eye. He was shy. I asked him about his camera one day, and he blushed." She laughed. "But it's been great since then. He still comes every morning. He doesn't eat though. You

should eat more Alex. I'm always afraid you'll get sick." They looked at each other silently. Alexander nodded, and I thought the two of them would be happy for the rest of their lives living just as they were then; a poor photographer and a bakery clerk. I even imagined her father teaching him how to bake and how one day I would come to Paris to find him an old man teaching his own son the art of breads and cakes.

"My future." He said fondly when she had gone. "It feels good, doesn't it, to be wanted; to love?" We agreed. "To think she's been here all her life – what are the odds, really, that we ever came to meet?" I held Reagan's hand and considered the same odds that brought Arianne into being. A great-grandfather here or there pausing for an extra day at some distant port and we would not have existed, let alone grown up together or become reunited. The odds; there are none, only the way things are.

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Alexander and Michelle were married on a Tuesday. Her father made the cake himself and cried when he gave her away. He was a noble man with calloused hands from years of hard work. He said he would make a man out of his new son. He had white moustache, and it shook when he laughed. "I'll be damned," he said, "if my girl isn't the most beautiful in the world this day." No one argued with him, but in our hearts, we knew it was not true – our daughters were more beautiful, this and every day. He danced with Arianne; held her in his arms and spun in circles to her great delight. He was old by then, nearly seventy. Arianne was two. They smiled the same. I think he lived a good life. He died the next year, just before we returned to Seattle; just before Michelle became pregnant and Alexander told me he was a lucky man.

There was a story the old baker told me I remembered at his funeral. Something about a bear and a squirrel; how no matter how big the bear was or how much he ate, the squirrel could live his life how he wanted and freely enjoy the society of his fellows. He clearly saw himself in the squirrel, but who was his bear I wondered. Was it really okay to simply ignore the beast which decimates the remainder of the world as long as your own small corner is full of joy? It was a passing question. It would subside. I had done the same thing. I am

the squirrel, lost in my hold, stashing my nuts for winter to come while some thousand others have not fuel enough. But I cannot alter myself. I will not suffer – I will not let my child suffer – to lessen the woe of strangers. Is this wrong? I cannot know. It passes. Arianne kisses my cheek, and I have no regrets. She holds a pebble in her hand, turns it about in wonder. I am glad I am here to watch the evolution of her eyes. I do not want to be burdened with work. I am not good. But I am happy.

I stared into the mirror the other day and remembered my youth; the idealism of my thoughts and how I would change the world; open the collective mind to the knowledge of a higher grace. Then I found the words have been with us from the start, and we have ignored them. Then I realized there is no we. And I was empty.

But we does exist, only much smaller than I had misbelieved. Alexander had found such a group, entering into a neighborhood that for centuries had oscillated around a few small blocks of metropolitan Paris. He married the baker's youngest daughter. The eldest sister had married the bookkeeper's son, while the butcher's daughter was married to the baker's son, who had settled into the woodworking business, leaving an opening for Alexander to take up his place in front of the ovens. They were a community. On Friday nights they gathered together in revelry, each individual chipping in – loaves of bread or strips of flesh – they made a feast. They danced. Musicians played. And we were welcome. They would have embraced us for the rest of our lives. Good people. I am sure they are there now, gathered in laughter, in communal comfort, without hierarchy or oppression; without greed or concern. Someday Alexander will be the old baker. He will cry in the aisle when he gives his daughter away. He will sit back and consider things; remember that once, long ago, he was American. He will hold a picture of his wife when she was young and weep that she has gone. His grandson will grasp his finger, and he will smile; feel alive. And he will die. His friends will weep, remember him on odd days and try to believe the world never was quite the same. But what does this tell, this glimpse into the future? Does it elicit the feelings he shall feel; encompass the moments, both grand and ill, which shall form him in the end? Does it describe a single breath, a single heartbeat or loving touch upon his arm? No. Words can never reach the simplicity with which we live this life. They cannot teach what is important.

Part Five

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It was not chance. Two days after we returned to Seattle, Wilson bumped into me on the street. It had been five years. Arianne was now three. At present she was acquainting herself with my condo, which we had just retrieved from the last of a line of renters. I was returning from the store with a few groceries for dinner when Wilson called my name from behind. I turned and found him smiling.

"How are you?" He asked, holding out his hand. He was quite bald now, and his eyes were tired. "It's been some time."

"Yes." I took his hand.

"You have a few minutes?"

"Not now." I motioned to the grocery bag. "The family's waiting for dinner."

"Family?"

"Yes. You?"

"No, no. Well, how about tomorrow? Meet me for lunch?"

"Okay." I said after a pause. It had become awkward.

"Give me a call in the morning." He said, handing me his card. "We'll set it up." When he was gone I asked myself if I had come back too soon. Surely my crimes would not warrant the Bureau's attention for such a time. But it was not a coincidence, of that I was sure. Something was about to happen. Something I knew nothing about. Something I did not care to know about.

I met him at the Olympic Sculpture Park the next morning a little after ten. After greeting we walked silently, puzzling over the creations rising from the bushes. We sat on two red chairs and positioned ourselves overlooking the Sound.

"How've you been?" I asked. It was overcast. In the water a sailboat motored by. From time to time a jogger passed. A train would chug beneath us before we were done.

"Quite well." He answered. The wind, rising off the Sound, was pleasant on my skin. It smelled faintly of salt. "You've been away some time."

"You say that as if you've been waiting." He smiled and looked at me. "What's going on Wilson?"

"You know, we never had any proof. You didn't need to run."

"What?"

"We both know how you got your money, but it doesn't matter – there's no proof. We had proof on Owen but not you. It would take a confession. You didn't need to flee the country."

"I wasn't fleeing. I have no reason to, whatever you think I may have done."

"Fair enough. I didn't expect you to compromise yourself. But you did leave suddenly. The same day we arrested Owen too. A coincidence right?"

"Owen?"

"There's no need for that. We know you knew each other growing up. I never thought you were lying, though, when you said you didn't know who he was."

"So you arrested him?"

"We did."

"How'd he make out?"

"Escaped, with the help of that filmmaker fellow."

"Alexander?"

"Yes. It was quite impressive really." He went into detail about the escape and how Owen and Alexander had vanished. "But the People's Universal Front has been growing. We know that. You remember Karl Hobenoff, obviously." I consented. "He did some recruiting in prison. They've been setting up cells around the country, preparing for something."

"And you think I'm involved in this?" It finally dawned on me.

"No." He answered firmly. "Though the timing of your return could make one think that."

"You know I've never had anything to do with that, except when it involved you."

"Yes, though, inadvertently, I think you may have had a greater influence on the PUF than you know."

"You can't blame me for that."

"No, but perhaps it places some small responsibility on you to help prevent things."

"What things?"

"I can't say, but all indications point to something big. People might get hurt. Maybe a lot of people."

"It's not my problem Wilson." It was a few moments before he responded.

"Thank God not everyone thinks of it the same way."

"I'm happy Wilson. Truly happy. I'm not going to walk away from that – not to help you – not for anything."

"I always thought you were a good man."

"Not now? I have not changed. I am merely living the life I before dreamed of living."

"I remember"

"I harm no one by my joy."

"in basic training"

"And owe nothing to anyone."

"the way you pushed me to improve myself. I would have failed. I had given up, and you took what little spare time you had to help me train, so I would make it. I never thanked you for that. That was a selfless act." The words hung for a moment. "When I heard what happened to you in Afghanistan, the way you walked away – I don't know; I was sad. It seemed unlike you. What right, I remember thinking, did you have to quit, to be so selfish as to hold your own will above the lives you could have saved by doing your job and doing it well? What right? But I see now it is only selfishness. Whatever happened to you?" I looked at him squarely. He did not seem to expect an answer. He stared angrily at the sea. "And now," he continued, "you are happy. Good. I don't care. People are going to die if we don't find these guys. I know it. And we can't find them, not fast enough. You could, I'm sure of that, but you don't care. Fine. So people are going to die. Fine."

"We took down one of the cells," he continued after a moment, "here in Seattle, during a bank robbery. It was one of seventeen nearly identical robberies in the country that week. They're funding themselves. For what we're not sure, but these guys had guns, explosives – the money to buy more and to bribe people they said. But it's a dead end. One of the guys identified Karl as their contact, but that's it. A free online e-mail address to reach him, nothing else. They didn't even know their targets yet. It's happening though. I feel it. Soon. I've got to get back to work." He said abruptly. "Best of luck." He stood and walked off without looking at me.

On the walk home his words wore on me. I pulled his card from my pocket and fingered it, considering many things. What if he was right? Did I—it is useless to retrace my thoughts. For the first time in a long while I questioned my life, my worth as a human being. By the time I reached home I was ready to call him; to agree to do whatever he asked out of shame. Then I opened the door. Arianne ran to me, joyously calling out in greeting and giggling when I took her in my arms, embraced her and swung her in a few quick circles. All other thoughts disappeared.

“How are you?” I asked as I carried her to the kitchen, where Reagan had just started preparations for lunch.

“Great.” She was always great, never good or okay but great, and she said it with a beaming show of teeth. “Mommy and I painted you a picture.” I kissed Reagan on the cheek as she sliced cheese cubes for a salad. Some chicken strips were cooking on the stove, and Arianne and I watched them while we talked. We took turns turning the pieces over with a fork.

“What’s the picture of?”

“A dolphin.”

“Can I see it?”

“Okay.” I set her down and she padded into the living room.

“How’s Wilson?” Reagan asked. I topped the salad bowls with chicken.

“Fine, I think. He wanted me to do some work for him.”

“Here you go.” Arianne handed me the painting. She climbed into her chair and waited for us to sit down before beginning to eat. I looked at the dolphin.

“I like it.” I said. “It’s very nice.”

“Thank you.”

“Is this a ferry?”

“Yes. We’re on it.”

“Oh, I see us in the window.” She laughed. The windows were blue dabs of paint.

“Mommy made the fish.” A school of red and silver fish swam behind the gray dolphin.

“And Arianne painted the dolphin.” Reagan countered. They stared at each other across the table in mock contest before bursting out in laughter.

"The dolphin looks happy." I said when they had calmed a bit.

"Dolphins are always happy." Arianne said authoritatively.

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"Even when there's a big shark chasing them?" Reagan said, making a biting motion with her hands. Arianne laughed and hid her face in mock fright.

"Maybe not then." She said thoughtfully after a moment.

"But they always seem happy."

"I agree." I assented.

"Especially when they're playing." Reagan added.

"Like when they followed our boat." Arianne said excitedly.

We gathered our dishes and headed to the sink. Arianne had a stool so she could stand between us. Reagan washed, Arianne rinsed and I dried. "They were dancing, and I touched one." She looked at her hand, remembering. "And it laughed."

The dishes were done, each to its own place in the drawers and cupboards.

"What shall we do now?"

"Can we go for a walk?" Arianne asked excitedly. She loved walking around the city, seeing new people, new places and things. I looked at Reagan. It was agreed with a look and a brief nod. "I'll get my coat." Arianne said as she ran from the kitchen. She was waiting when we reached the door. In the hall she walked between us, one hand in my palm, one in Reagan's. "Can I push the button?" She asked in the elevator.

"Of course."

"Is it this one?"

"Number one?"

"Yes."

"Yes it is." She pushed the button. The elevator jerked, and she grabbed my leg.

A mist descended as we walked north. Arianne hummed and would skip on occasion. Catching our reflection in a passing window I was struck by the abnormality of our life. I looked back toward the financial district, where at that moment thousands upon thousands of individuals were at work. It did not add up, the hours they spent; to produce what? I glanced at Arianne. She had stopped to watch a beetle weave its way along the sidewalk. We paused beside her and crouched to share her wonder. The beetle stopped, turned its head

from side to side and struck out toward Arianne. She was motionless until it passed. Then she followed its progress upside down, gazing through her legs. Turning, I again caught our reflection. There was something beautiful in the simplicity of the image, something almost animal. A jogger passed. His face was stern. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes, and his feet hit the ground angrily. We walked on.

At the beach we crawled on the driftwood and tried to make a bear in the sand. It was too dry so we dug a hole instead. Arianne stood inside and laughed at us. A seabird sat nearby. It preened. Arianne mimicked it, and the bird seemed to watch with interest. An hour passed.

"What did Wilson want you to do?" Reagan asked.

"Find Owen."

"Why?"

"He thinks they're going to do something; that someone's going to get hurt."

"What did you say?"

"No. Isn't the sky beautiful?" Thunderclouds hung above the Olympics. In the settling dusk they glowed red.

"Yes." We were silent, observing. "Do you ever think we owe something to the world?" She asked later. Arianne had fallen asleep with her head on Reagan's lap. We were on the couch.

"Of course. We've talked about it before."

"I know, but is it enough for us to be happy if we can help others also enjoy life; or even less, not to suffer?"

"We make each other happy, and her, right?"

"Yes." It was not argument enough, for her or for me.

"What can we do?"

"I don't know."

"What is the problem, if we are to try to fix it?"

"Suffering."

"How do we begin?"

"I don't know." She stroked Arianne's cheek. We stared into the emptiness of our minds. Outside it began to rain.

Owen's Second Interlude

Ah, Fred, a masterpiece of disassociation. Never has a man's talent been so thoroughly wasted. What we might have accomplished, he and I. Well, it is no use to lament.

How is the story treating you so far? I should thank you for having me here: in your thoughts. It means a lot, keeps me alive. That's the thing about it too. I may well live longer than you. It is a lot to hope, I understand, but per chance a hundred years from now someone cracks open this book and reads of me. Well then, I will still be alive the same as I have always been. And you? You will be dead. How many words will then be read of you? The lines on your gravestone? A lingering memory in your grandchild's mind?

I apologize. I do not know you. Hell, you're probably wondering what this has to do with anything. To that I say, haven't you ever wanted to break out of your role, to reach out to someone, do something new? It is as simple as that.

I really wish you could tell me; well, everything. About your childhood, your dreams, your fears; all the moments of your life, both good and bad; to see you smile, laugh; to share a private look of sincere honesty such as come so rarely in life. I would like to know the deepest doubts and beliefs found within you. The day, well, I cannot give an example. Only you can do that. What is it you cherish most?

I'll be leaving you soon enough. The pages to the right grow thin. Where will we be then, you and I?

God's Eye View

-One-

Owen stared out from the dimly lit hotel room and watched the rain. Behind him, seated at a small Formica table, Karl shuffled a deck of cards.

"God this place is disgusting." Clara said, emerging from the bathroom. "There's slime on the shower curtain. And look at this carpet. It's probably been here since the seventies."

"It's just for a night." Karl yawned. He dealt the cards for a hand of cribbage.

"It's still a filthy hole." She sat at the table.

"Fair enough. You playing?" He asked Owen.

"What?" Owen turned from the window. "Yeah."

"Are you okay?" Clara asked as he sat down.

"Fine. My lead? Three."

"Twelve."

"Twenty-two." A moment passed. "Owen. Twenty-two."

"Oh, twenty-four." He continued to stare blankly across the room. "It's no good." He said when the hand was over. Karl had won the game.

"What?" Clara asked. Karl threw himself on one of the twin beds. The mattress creaked.

"Everything."

"Everything? What, the plan? It will work."

"I have no doubt of that. It just won't change anything, not really."

"Where did this come from? It's been your idea all along. You said it would alter the foundations of society. You said it would be the beginning of a new order, a..."

"I know what I said. I just realized, watching the cars drive by, that it won't be enough. It won't change the way people think. They'll just work harder to recreate what already exists. And they will hate us. That's the worst of it. The people we're trying to help will hate us the most. Tell me, why do I care about inequality? I want to not care. I want to accept fate and find a dull life with a wife and a child and a

job I do only to earn a paycheck. To be normal. But I can't." Karl and Clara stared at Owen. His face was in a shadow, and he seemed lost.

"Do you want a drink?" Clara asked softly.

"No." His voice was emotionless. "We never talk." He said after a moment. "Do you realize that? We used to talk about things. I miss that."

"We talk." She answered.

"Not about what is important."

"The struggle is important."

"No. It's work." He laughed. "Do you know how it all started?"

"You've told us many times how you made the money and realized you had a mission to fight inequality."

"I was bored. I had all that money, and I didn't know what to do with myself. I was just curious to see what I could make people do. And look where we are now. Tomorrow we'll be terrorists. That's it."

"That's not true. This is for a pure cause. It will make the world a better place."

"Don't you think every terrorist for every cause has thought the same way? We're not right. They're not right. No one's right. Can't you see that? It's just something we've latched onto; a belief. Everyone believes in something. We can't all be right. It's all simply a guess but more than that a way to keep ourselves occupied. It's boredom. People don't have to survive anymore. We have too much time. Some people fill it with books or movies or sex or politics or sports or work or family. We've filled our time with fanaticism. In the end it doesn't matter, I suppose, which we choose."

"What has gotten into you Owen? I don't understand you. Don't you care about the injustice of this world? Don't you care about the cause? About me?"

"No." He answered after a long pause. "I don't suppose I do. Really, I'm just passing time until I die. I have been for a long time. What, does that bother you?" She had begun to cry.

"I love you." She said without looking at him. "Does that mean nothing?"

"You don't love me Clara."

"I do."

"What does it feel like?" His voice was filled with wonder.

"Terrible."

"At the moment?"

"Yes. God, you're such an ass."

"But besides that, what does it feel like?"

"If you don't know..."

"What?"

"I feel sorry for you."

"Why?"

"Stop. Please, just stop. Have you felt nothing for me, all this time?"

"Of course. We've had a lot of fun."

"That's not what I asked."

"Really? What's more important than enjoying life? Say, are you guys hungry? Let's go grab some dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself. Karl?" Karl Stared at Owen without speaking. Owen chuckled, shrugged his shoulders and stood from the table.

"You bastard!" Karl blurted suddenly.

"Pardon?"

"You cruel, cruel man. All she's ever done is love you. How dare you treat her like that!" Owen chuckled again, took his coat from the chair and headed toward the door. Enraged, Karl leapt from the bed and struck Owen on the cheek. Owen crashed against the television.

"Feel better?" He asked as he straightened himself. Karl stared at him but did not answer. Owen shrugged his shoulders and left the room. Outside the rain fell harder. Owen paused beneath the shelter of the hotel before walking to his car. He opened the door but did not get in; instead, closing it, he zipped his coat and walked to the street. A few blocks to the south were a couple fast food restaurants. To the north was a strip club, a grocery store and finally a tavern, to which he directed his steps. "Do you serve food?" He asked the bartender.

"We do." The bartender handed him a menu. "The kitchen closes in half an hour though. A drink to start you off?"

"Rum and Coke."

"Here you go." The bartender said a moment later. "Want to start a tab?"

"No." He handed over a twenty. "I'll take the fish and chips. Keep the change."

"Thanks." Owen turned from the bar. The tavern was nearly empty. Three young men were playing pool in the back, an older man

and woman sat at a table in the middle of the room and an even older man sat at the far end of the bar.

"Dead in here, isn't it?" Owen said when the bartender brought his food.

"Yeah. It is Wednesday night. Some of the regulars just left a few minutes before you came in. You from around here?"

"No. I'm staying at the hotel down the block."

"Figured as much. We don't see a lot of new faces. What brings you to town?"

"Business."

"Oh yeah, what do you do?" The bartender began to wipe down the bar.

"Activism I guess you'd call it."

"Environmental?"

"No, more political I suppose. I'm thinking of getting out of it though. You ever feel like just walking away and starting new?"

"Not really. Everyone I know either works or drinks here. Hell, I met my wife here."

"Really? How long you been married?"

"Nine years."

"Kids?"

"Two. My son is seven. My daughter is four. They're great kids too. Mikey, that's my son, is a dynamite baseball player, just like his old man. He had two home runs in his last game. Do you have any kids?"

"Me? No."

"Married?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"Yes. I don't know. We've been together seven years, but I think it's over. I've never loved her, you know, just I've been afraid to be alone. Hell with it. I should just walk away now. Leave it all behind. Tell me, do you love your wife?"

"Yes."

"What's it feel like to love someone?"

"You honestly don't know?"

"No."

"It's... I can't explain it. I just know. I mean, I couldn't imagine life without her."

"Do you miss her?"

"Of course."

"All the time?"

"No, I suppose not. But I think about her a lot. I don't know buddy. Like I said, I just couldn't imagine life without her."

"Are you always glad to see her?"

"Yes. There may be the odd time, but yeah I look forward to seeing her when I go home at night."

"Would you, if you had the chance, spend all your time with her?"

"That's a little much. Trust me, there's no way she'd want to spend all her time with me either. You've got to have a life you know. You finished with the plate?"

"Yes."

"Want another drink?"

"No thank you. Have a nice night."

"Thanks. You too buddy." Owen stepped into the rain. He looked up and tried to catch a drop in his mouth before crossing the street towards the motel. Short of the room he paused and made his way to his car. Settling into the driver's seat he was still and listened to the rain patter on the metal roof. It was peaceful and he realized he had missed something. What he was not sure, but somewhere in life he had overlooked the simplicity of what it is to feel. Then he was struck the way a life can unfold; how he began at that first breath pulled from his mother's womb and had traced step by step the course of his life to that moment. And the moment was gone. The happiest the same as the most dreadful was destined to vanish. In the end what did it leave? Memories were not real. And he hurt at the realization that he was empty. And he lost faith in all causes. He turned the key in the ignition and placed the car in reverse. But he did not take his foot from the brake. It had passed. He would not flee, not yet. Tomorrow, perhaps, when the job was done.

-Two-

Some ten miles to the south at the downtown Seattle FBI building Tom Wilson sat in his office watching the same rainstorm. It was nearly nine o'clock. He had been at the office since six that morning.

"Why don't you go home?" A coworker asked, poking her head through the door.

"I'm fine. Thanks Shelley."

"Figure it out yet?"

"Tomorrow. We took down a cell in LA this morning. It's going down tomorrow."

"What?"

"God knows. They had enough explosive to do a lot of damage though."

"Will they kill anyone?"

"Intentionally? I doubt it. But whatever they do, if it's on this scale, someone is bound to get hurt."

"No luck anywhere else?"

"No. We've got units searching in all the cities we think they're in but nothing."

"Why are you here then? There's not a cell in Seattle anymore."

"The e-mail giving the final go ahead was traced to a café just a few blocks from here. The leadership is in Seattle."

"You think Owen is here?"

"Owen, Karl, the Kirkpatrick girl. I think they're all here. We should have put them away when we had the chance."

"What about your friend?"

"Him? He's not involved."

"He did just come back."

"I talked to him."

"What? He's a suspect Tom."

"Not anymore. I closed his file."

"And if you're wrong?"

"I'm not."

"Why do you protect him? You always did, back when Roger wanted to bring him in for questioning, years ago. It's not like you."

"I trusted him I guess."

"The man is a thief."

"We never proved that."

"No, but we know it's true."

"Yes."

"So why stick up for him?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure." He paused. "I used to know. I think I envied him."

"But not now?"

"No, I think I still do."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't care."

"Is that a good quality?"

"It would make life easier."

"Do you believe that?"

"He's got a daughter."

"So."

"Think about it Shelley. He has spent the last five years god knows where traveling the world, he has a wife and a child he sincerely loves and he doesn't give a fuck about anyone else or anything that happens in this world. How can I not envy him? He's free. He's happy."

"He's also a criminal Tom."

"I'm going to head home." He said, rising from his desk. "I'll see you tomorrow Shelley."

"Goodnight Tom. Hey, wait." She stopped him by the arm. "Let me tell you something an agent told me when I first started with the bureau."

"What's that?"

"It's more important to be good than loved or wealthy or happy."

"Perhaps I was wrong."

"Don't say that. If you're not good, what do you have? You're a good man Tom. Don't forget that."

"Thank you, though I'm not sure it's true. And even if it was, it would be nice to have at least one of those other things. At least for a little while."

"So it would Tom. Have a good night."

"You too Shelley. Say hi to Rick for me."

"Okay." She waved as the elevator doors closed and he descended to the street. Outside he stretched his arms and looked into the sky. Rain pelted against his face and he wondered if she was right.

"Owen." He said suddenly. "Where are you?" He looked about as if expecting to find him walking down the street. The only pedestrian was a ragged man who paused when Wilson looked at him.

"Sorry to bother you sir," the man said, "but do you think you could help a good man out? I'm trying to get into the mission."

"I don't have any cash, or I would..."

"I understand. God bless you sir." The stranger walked on. Owen stood motionless a brief moment before walking the opposite direction. Faintly he heard the man begin to whistle. It was a happy tune. It faded into his footsteps and the resonance of the rain.

-Three-

Owen was startled by a knocking on the window. He had been asleep, apparently all night. Daylight had come and Clara stood outside the car. She waved at him. Yawning, he turned the key in the ignition and rolled the window down.

"Good morning." He said casually. She shook her head.

"Karl went to get breakfast. Why don't you come inside and wash up." He nodded, rolled the window up and followed her to the room. "Why did you sleep in the car?" She asked when they were inside.

"Don't know." He answered, taking his shirt off. "Just sort of happened." He entered the bathroom and closed the door. The shower turned on a moment later and Clara sat on the bed, staring at the door. She had not moved when Karl returned with a bag of groceries.

"You got him up?" He said, setting the bag on the table. He opened the blinds to let the gray light in.

"Obviously." Clara answered. She lay back on the bed. The sound of the shower died. A few minutes later Owen emerged dressed in the yellow and red uniform of a DHL delivery driver. The matching van outside had been stolen in Tacoma the day before. He selected a donut from the box Karl opened on the table and sat in one of the chairs.

"Five hours." He said looking at his watch. "We've got a lot to do."

"We should be out of here already." Karl said tersely.

"Nonsense. We've got plenty of time."

"We got to get downtown still."

"Yes." He took an orange from the bag. Clara joined them. "We'll get them all placed by three. If not, we skip a few or set them for later. It'll have the same effect."

"You think anyone will get caught?" Clara asked.

"Overall?"

"Yes."

"Most likely. It's too late to really change things though, even if we lose a few cities, especially secondary ones like Jacksonville or Phoenix. Those are the one's most likely to get caught too. Did we get confirmations from everyone?"

"Los Angeles didn't respond." Karl answered.

"Which one?"

"Team two."

"Anyone else?"

"No. I wonder if they've been compromised."

"It's possible. When did you check?"

"An hour ago. Everyone else was right on time."

"There's nothing we can do either way."

"Shouldn't we run through things once more?"

"We can. Or we can pack up and leave. We've been through it a dozen times."

"Are you guys nervous?" Clara asked.

"Yes."

"A little."

"My stomach is fluttering." She said.

"Last chance if you want out." Owen said seriously, looking at both of them.

"Never."

"After all we've done to get here?"

"Okay then. Shall we?"

Soon they were on the road, heading south toward the city. Karl and Owen rode in the van, each dressed as a DHL employee. Clara drove the car behind. When they reached downtown she parked in a lot and joined them in the van.

"Number one." She said, taking a clipboard from a backpack and turning to the first page. "Columbia Center. Deliveries to the third and twenty-third floors. Karl, you'll be heading to the basement; Owen to the twenty-fifth floor." They pulled into a delivery parking spot, and the two men exited the van. At the rear door they received packages from Clara. "Timer set and ready to detonate at three." She said as she handed the first to Karl. "Be careful." She handed the second to Owen. He kissed her on the cheek. They headed inside.

-Four-

"We got activity on the e-mail account." An agent told Wilson, entering his office in a rush.

"More of the same?"

"No. The account was accessed."

"When?"

"Just after nine."

"An hour and a half ago? Damn it, why am I just hearing this now?"

"We just got it."

"Okay. Let's hope it doesn't hurt us. Where was it?"

"Kinko's in Shoreline."

"Okay. Good work. Tell Campos to get the directions and meet me at my car. Wait, did a new message go out?"

"No. All the blank ones that came in were deleted. That was it."

"All right. Go get Campos. I'll be there shortly." He picked up his desk phone and dialed. "Sir, this is Tom Wilson. Yes. Yes. There is a high certainty they will act today. This morning at eight, twenty-eight blank messages were sent to the e-mail of the leadership. We think this is a confirmation code, and it backs up what we learned from the cell in LA. Yes sir. Twenty-eight cells. We're tracking the e-mails now. We should have the list shortly. Yes, we'll send it up when we do. Yes sir, one other thing. We've got a lead on the new Seattle cell. Yes, the suspected leadership. I'm on my way to check it out now. Yes sir. Goodbye sir." He replaced the receiver, grabbed his jacket and left the office. "Macklin!" He called as he entered the maze of desks outside his office door.

"Yes sir."

"When you get the city list for the emails send it up the chain right away."

"Yes sir." Wilson headed toward the elevator. "Agent Wilson!" Macklin called after him. "It just came in." The two men met half way to Macklin's desk. He handed the printout to Tom. "I'll send it up now sir."

"Christ!" Wilson cursed as he glanced on the list. "There's another cell in LA. Three in New York. Chicago, Boston, San Francisco... Where we thought pretty much." He was talking primarily

to himself. "Sioux Falls, South Dakota? What the hell? Banks! They're after banks. Or credit card companies. Got that Macklin?"

"What's that sir?"

"They're after banks or credit card companies. Sent that up with the list. Highlight Sioux Falls. Focus our units here on the financial district. Come on people, we've got to find these bastards. Keep me updated." He ran to the elevator and soon was speeding northward with agent Campos. They arrived at the Kinko's just after eleven. Within a few minutes, they had requisitioned the security video.

"I need 9:08 this morning." Tom told the flustered store manager as they began to review the video. The man fumbled with the controls. Agent Campos joined them while he attempted to queue the correct time. "Find something?" Wilson asked. Campos had been questioning the employees.

"A couple hours ago a DHL driver came in, used the computer for a couple minutes and then left. Might be our man."

"It is." Wilson said suddenly. On the screen Karl was entering the store. "I'll be damned. Put out the word, suspects are likely dressed as DHL employees. What was he driving? Can we see the parking lot at this time?" The manager obliged. The stolen van was parked outside. "Zoom in on the license plate." The letters were legible and Wilson's face erupted into a smile. "Got you." He said confidently. Agent Campos was on the phone. He soon read the plate number.

"Should we send it out Seattle PD?" Campos asked Wilson.

"Yes."

"Yes." Campos repeated into the phone.

-Five-

"We've got to ditch the van." Clara said as Owen and Karl entered the van. They had just returned from the Washington Mutual Tower, their third building. It was 11:38. Seven bombs had been planted. She turned the police scanner off.

"How long?" Owen asked.

"It just came across two minutes ago. License, our descriptions. The bags are packed." They took off their uniforms, took the offered backpacks and the three slipped into the street.

"What do we have left?" Owen asked after they rounded the corner.

"Four each." Clara answered. "I ditched the rest. I figure we're conspicuous enough as it is with these." They were silent for a block and a half. "Should we walk away?"

"It would be smart. Get on the bus." They boarded a northbound bus. They rode in silence and got off at the Westlake Mall.

"I don't want to give up." Karl said. They were walking through the mall.

"No?" Owen answered. "Either way we need to lay low, figure this out. I haven't been on the monorail forever." He turned to follow a sign. Soon they were standing on the platform, waiting to board the arriving car. "I remember riding this as a kid. It was the greatest thing. I suppose when the subway opens, it won't seem as exciting anymore. I remember my sister got sick once, threw up all over this old lady."

"You have a sister?" Clara asked with puzzlement.

"Yes. I never told you?"

"No."

"Huh."

"How old is she?"

"Oh, five years younger than me. I haven't seen her for years though. I think she moved to Portland. After this all this, I should track her down. It would be good to see her."

"What's her name?"

"Geri."

"I can't believe you never told me about her."

"It didn't come up."

"That's not true. I asked you if you had brothers or sisters, when we first met."

"What did I say?"

"That you didn't"

"I guess I lied."

"Any more?"

"No, just a sister." They arrived at Seattle Center and made their way to an open field. They sat in the grass, where no one could come near or overhear without being seen. "What do you think?"

"Whatever you think is best is fine with me." Clara said quickly.

"Same here." Karl added.

"Okay." He thought a few moments. "We go back separately. Hand me the clipboard Clara." She retrieved it from her backpack. He flipped through the pages, removing three pages. "Karl you take these." He handed him the pages. "Clara these two. I'll take these four." He stared blankly at the clipboard. "Yeah, that will work. Place the packages and then get out of town. Avoid cameras best you can. Clara take the car. We'll call you and let you know where to pick us up."

"Anywhere?" Karl asked.

"Head north. After we meet we'll head east, disappear. Good?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"If any of us don't make it... If you don't hear from me by five you've got to go. Same all the way around, okay?" Clara and Karl nodded. "Karl, want to head out first?"

"Okay." Owen held out his hand. Karl shook it. "See you in a few hours."

"Good luck." Karl hugged Clara.

"Until then." Clara said. Karl headed toward the monorail. Owen and Clara were silent until he was out of sight. They began to walk toward the Space Needle. "You're not coming with us are you, either way?"

"No."

"There's nothing I can say?"

"No."

"Thank you."

"For what?" They stopped. They were in the shadow. A family walked past, holding hands. The little boy was laughing.

"Making me happy, all this time."

"You're welcome." They embraced. Her warmth infused his skin. Her smell brought back memories. He kissed her on the cheek. "Goodbye Clara." Their eyes locked and for a moment it seemed she would speak, perhaps plea. She shook her head, touched his face with her palm and walked away.

Owen was motionless for a minute. Suddenly he chuckled to himself. It was over. He felt light, free. Stashing his backpack in a bush he entered the Space Needle. When he reached the observation

deck he walked outside and stared over the city. It was alive with motion.

So many people, he thought, watching the cars course through the streets, considering the thousands of windows in view, behind each of which lived or worked any number of individuals. So many people racing about, living life: each with their own perspective, their own view of how things are and should be. That was it; a passing thought. His eye was caught by a seagull gliding through the sky. Its eye moved in its socket, and it squawked. Owen looked down. Miniature people made their way along the concourses, some with haste, some at ease. A child drew his gaze. She ran free through the grass and even from the height he could tell she laughed. Her parents laughed with her, and they danced.

Owen circled the observation deck until he faced the Sound. The water was gray, as were the clouds overhead that had begun to envelope the city. To the west the Olympics glowed in the sunshine like a distant world. It was the kind of sight that conjured dreams of heaven. Owen closed his eyes and imagined he was standing atop Mount Olympus, free from all responsibility and restraints of society. Perhaps he would go there, take the ferry across and hitchhike into the hills. It was amazing, he considered, how long he had lived in the city and gazed across at those snowy peaks without having been to the rain forest or climbed the mountains. As a child they had always gone east, toward the more epic but less dramatic Cascade peaks. There were so many worlds so close to the one he had lived in, yet he never noticed. There were parts of city he had never been; neighborhoods of people born and dying without notice; passing faces drifting through life unknown to and unknowing of his existence. What did it mean, all this? He opened his eyes. A lightning bolt descended from the sky, striking the water. It was gone, as if it had never been. Thunder. A rainbow in the distance, dying in the snow of Mount Olympus. Below, on the ground, he saw the same girl as before. She still was laughing. He smiled. It began to rain. The child looked up and began to dance. Elsewhere umbrellas sprouted over heads and people ran for cover. Soon they were alone; the girl, her mother and father, dancing in the rain, laughing.

Owen, above, understood something then; something he had lost or, perhaps, never had. It made him happy. He turned from the sight and descended to the ground. Outside he hesitated, glancing first toward the west, where the mountains of the unknown awaited,

then at the bush where he had dropped the backpack. He took a step toward the mountains but paused, reconsidered and retrieved the bombs. There would be time enough to see those sights in the days to come – time enough to see the world and seek his place in the rain.

-Six-

“What do we have?” Wilson asked the agent. They stood at the rear doors of the DHL van. It was a quarter after noon.

“They walked sir. We should have video momentarily, but a witness saw two men and a woman head south about half an hour ago. Each had a backpack. They left behind seven package bombs. Your basic C4 with a timer. They were not set yet.”

“More than they could carry?”

“Be my guess. There’s a police scanner. Looks like they bugged out as soon as the plate went out to SPD. We’ve got the bomb squad searching the building. A team’s on surveillance too. Any guess where to look?”

“Financial institutions.”

“Half the building is a bank. Should we evacuate?”

“No.” Wilson thought for a moment, his hand to his chin. “Not yet. They’re going for shock value. All the bombs will be set for one time. Damn it, we need to know where they’ve been and how much time we have.”

The agent’s phone rang. “Okay, we’re on our way.” He said after listening a moment. “We’ve got them on video. This way.” He led Tom into the building. In a few minutes they were watching Karl place a bomb in the building’s electrical transfer station. “Three o’clock.” The word soon arrived. “The bombs are set for three o’clock.” Images of the three terrorists were sent out to all agencies for immediate apprehension. The police presence downtown surged and the decision was made, well above agent Wilson’s head, to release the images and names to the local news channels. The images went live a little after one, or about the time Owen retrieved his backpack from the bush outside the Space Needle. By the time he was seated in the back of a cab, police, FBI and Homeland Security personnel were rushing to review surveillance video from nearly every high-rise in the downtown business district.

"What's with all the damn police?" The cabbie wondered as they sat at a stoplight. In the back seat Owen had pulled out his cell phone. He dialed Clara.

"Yes?" Her voice was wary.

"Get out now." His voice was serious, caring.

"I've still got two..."

"Now."

"Okay." He pressed end, scrolled to Karl's name and hesitated. He closed the phone. "Here will work." He told the cabbie. "Keep the change." Once out of the cab he ducked into an alley.

"We've got one." An agent told Wilson. "Columbia Center. They arrived there at ten thirty-five. They're tracking their movements now. Looks the same as here."

"Thanks. Keep me updated." He added a mark to the timeline in his notebook. Looking at the activity around him, he felt helpless. They had done everything. Word was coming in from around the country. Some successes. Very little progress. Two men were caught in Boston and a third in Atlanta. A dozen bombs had been found nationwide, but they were running out of time. It would be a black day for the bureau in the press. Beyond that, he could not know. At least they weren't targeting people. He could handle a little chaos on his watch. He could not accept death. He looked at the timeline in his notebook. They had been close all day. It was frustrating. He could only wait.

"Do you think they're gone sir?"

"If they're smart they would be. But no, I think they're out there. It's only a matter of time Jenkins." Wilson's phone rang. "Agent Wilson."

"Sir, this is Campos."

"Go ahead."

"Ten fifty-three to eleven sixteen they were at 999 3rd Avenue."

"So they were there between the Columbia Center and here."

"Yes sir."

"Anything else?"

"No sir."

"There's still more bombs out there Campos. We've got to find them."

"Yes sir. We're working on it. What? Just a second sir." There was talking on the other end of the line. "A call just came

through on the hotline. A cabbie says he dropped Owen off maybe fifteen minutes ago."

"Where?"

"On Fourth, midway between Pike and Union."

"Good. Make sure you get someone out to talk to him."

"Already done sir. The cabbie also said Owen made a phone call just before he got out. He says he overheard the phrase 'get out now.'"

"Damn. Did he say which way Owen went?"

"Not in what I have, but he verified that Owen had a backpack."

"Okay. Good work Campos. Make sure all personnel – I mean everyone, security guards, valets, everyone – in a six block radius from where he got out of that cab are looking for this guy." He found himself unconsciously looking up and down the street, as if expecting Owen to round the corner. He was only a few blocks from the drop point.

"Yes sir."

-Seven-

Owen sat on the seldom used staircase of a nearby skyscraper. He was debating his options. It was foolish to continue, he knew. They were waiting for him at the last building. He almost walked right to them too, but by chance he saw a policeman's foot before committing to the power relay. They did not see him, and he slipped away. It would be the same everywhere no doubt. And the streets were crawling with cops. He had slipped in this building through an open loading dock. He was half waiting to be found; half aware they would eventually find the video of him entering the staircase. A door opened far above. Footsteps descending. A second door opened and closed. He glanced at his watch. It was just after two. Let it go, he told himself. He stood, walked up a couple flights and sat back down. How had they known? Possibilities ran through his head. He closed his eyes and wished it all away; wished he was still in bed, lying half awake. It made him smile. Reality never worked out like a dream.

He felt suddenly like a child, as if everything was a game. And he knew what he had been seeking his entire life: perpetual youth – the freedom and self certainty of a child's mind. What would it be

worth to never lose faith in fathers, god and hope; to never know empathy or be confused by perspective? He tried to remember life without future or past, before anticipation, before disappointment, where the moment reigned. He opened his eyes. The cold concrete of the stairwell was empty. Faintly he heard the storm outside. The poor policemen, he thought, looking for him in the downpour. Who decided their shifts and who would patrol the street and who would search inside? So much of life is controlled by the decisions of others. Enough, he thought, such things can go on forever. He rose to his feet.

Many floors above, he left the staircase and slipped into an empty conference room at the corner of the building. Locking the door, he set his backpack on the table. He removed a package and opened it. He placed the firing mechanism and set the timer for five minutes before setting it in the far corner, where the sides of the building met, and left the room. He paused to lock the door and to break a piece of plastic off in the key hole. He returned to the staircase, descended five floors and waited.

He whistled a slow tune; something from his childhood. It made him smile. He followed the second hand on his watch. Forever it marched, restricting, directing. When it passed twelve he entered the building and walked swiftly beyond the maze of cubicles; past all the faces buried in computer screens and telephones. He was near the elevator when the bomb went off. The building shook slightly, and before the first "what was that" could be voiced he pulled the lever on a fire alarm. Confusion turned to panic. People began to run. He continued toward the far end of the building. He paused at a door with a keypad lock. It opened. He held the door. "It was a bomb." He told the fleeing workers. "The building's being evacuated. Take the stairs." Unasking, they obeyed.

A moment later he was alone in a room of computer servers. He set the remaining bombs in his pack for three minutes, dispersed them in the room and headed to the stairwell. The backpack gone, he blended in with the worker's from the upper floors.

Outside, Wilson saw the first explosion. It was a ways up, twenty or thirty stories. The shards of Plexiglas fell like snowflakes mingling in the rain. The sound made his shoulders wilt. It had begun. Unconsciously he ran toward the building. He could hear the fire alarm on the street, and soon people were pouring out, directed by the mass of FBI and police that had been standing by. Mindlessly

Wilson watched the crowd; all the faces and hands pointed upward; the fear; the unknown. Another explosion, larger, inside. Screams. He was frozen. Vaguely he heard his name on the radio; was aware his phone was ringing. He had lost. He shook his head, took his phone from his pocket, then stopped. He was there, before him in a passing crowd.

“Owen!” He screamed. For a moment their eyes met; fifteen feet apart, a dozen people between. Owen smiled, understood. Wilson glared, reached for his sidearm. By the time he fought through the crowd Owen was thirty paces ahead. He turned the corner and headed north.

Part Six

-40-

We awoke early. It happens sometimes. In the city there is always noise. Certain days it draws you from your sleep. Arianne joined us in our room and snuggled between us. It is always nice to lie there and be warm. Silence is a friend then, so too the darkness of daydreams. It is one of the greatest freedoms, perhaps, to be able to savor the experience of waking; to ease into the new day without burden or schedule; to be held close and loved. I remember dozing off a bit. I dreamed of a different world, a place where everyone knew what it was to be free.

I felt Arianne's fingers on my stomach, tickling. She was laughing. Reagan tickled her feet. Awakened, I tickled Reagan's elbow. It did not last. It is hard to do anything and laugh so hard at the same time. "Look!" Arianne said excitedly. A moth on the window was silhouetted in a sunbeam on the wall. As it walked it fluttered its wings and the shadow danced. Entranced, we were still. When a cloud took the light we left the bed.

When the telephone rang I was surprised. It is seldom anyone remembers us. It was my father. I answered.

"How are you?" He asked.

"Good."

"And my favorite granddaughter?"

"Great of course. Would you like to speak to her?"

"Sure."

"Arianne!"

"Yes?"

"Grandpa." I handed her the phone. While they talked I resumed packing our picnic lunch. When I was finished I set the backpack by the door. Arianne met me there and handed me the phone. "Hello?"

"Yes." My father answered. His voice was always lighter after he spoke with Arianne. "How is life treating you son?"

"Very well, like I said."

"How is Reagan?"

"Quite well. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. Getting old, but other than that I can't complain."

It was always the same. He would call, and we had nothing to talk about. "Well, just called to make sure you're still alive." Dead air. It made me a little sad sometimes. I think he wanted to reach out, try to connect, but he didn't know how. I suppose I can be a hard person to talk to. My life is outside of what most people know. After a few minutes of idle chatting about his garden, Arianne and the news he read in the paper, we said goodbye. I looked at Arianne, talking to Reagan. Would she and I ever be like that? It made me think.

"It might rain." Reagan said as I sat beside them.

"It might."

"Shall we go?"

"Any objections?"

"I like the rain." Arianne said happily. I could never express how deeply I love her. The image of her bright eyes will forever warm me. Reagan was first to her feet.

We were nearly finished with lunch when it began to rain. Arianne began to laugh and ran about. Overhead the Space Needle loomed like a giant umbrella to which people flew. Our daughter danced, and we joined her. I held Reagan close. "I love you." She said.

"As I you." Her lips were wet with raindrops. They ran down my chin when we kissed.

Arianne ran off as soon as the pack was on my back, and we followed hand in hand. There was a lightning strike at sea. I saw it in the crease between two trees. We ran on. We danced. We laughed. Part of me, briefly, felt sad. Did no one else enjoy life? It was pushed aside.

Later, on the monorail, I thought of Owen and the things Wilson said the day before. I looked at Reagan and remembered when the three of us drove to the beach with Reagan's mother. We found a seal carcass on the shore, and Owen's dog tried to eat it. We stayed up late around a bonfire, and Owen told us he would change the world. He was still trying it seemed. Odd how memories rise, isn't it. In some way, for all I had, I missed my friend.

As we descended to the street there was the muffled sound of an explosion. We paused before heading west on Pine. The rain let up. A random sunbeam peeked through the clouds. Arianne chased it on the sidewalk until it disappeared. Another explosion. This time the

other pedestrians noticed. "I wonder what that was." Reagan said after a few moments of silence.

"Owen." I answered.

"Do you think?"

"Yes." We continued west. At Third Avenue we waited for the light. Suddenly there were screams to the South. Unconsciously I looked. Owen was running toward us. Behind him Wilson jumped over a man Owen had pushed to the ground. The next moments were surreal. Owen suddenly veered West in front of an unloading bus. In the next lane a second bus, moving. The screech of tires. A thud. Owen did not make a sound. Beneath the bus, the street was red.

Agent Wilson slowed to a standstill. He glanced at the scene, and then looked up, directly at me. Our eyes met. It was some time before he turned, and I felt Arianne grasping my leg. I picked her up.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Huh."

That was it; the same sound as when she discovered the moon can shine in daylight; expressive, true beyond anything else.

